

# Come What May

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The third in the Bad Neighbors trilogy, sequel to Recurring Nightmares-The secret to immortality has been exposed, our two favorite Jashinists discover the origins of their deity, and are faced with the choice of sticking to their faith, or turning their backs on everlasting life. AU with MxM pairings. Warning; Yaoi.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2013-09-17

Updated: 2016-03-20

Words: 122486

Chapters: 19

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Adventure - Characters: Sasuke U., Neji H., Shikamaru N., Akatsuki - Reviews: 54 - Favs: 30 - Follows: 28

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9693304/1/Come-What-May>

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# What was lost

## Come What May

The entire world seemed quiet, everything muffled and softened by the gently pouring rain. Colors were dulled, casting a gray outline over the entire city. Lights struggled to make a difference, to force their dying yellow glow on the neglected neighborhood, illuminating streets that would rise to a whole new level of dangerous in the darkness.

Rapid footsteps are nearly drowned out among the soft patter of the raindrops on cracked and damaged concrete. Calculating eyes, not quite past the point of panic, but increasingly close, flicked around his surroundings, pushing his body just a bit faster every time one of the streetlights behind him fizzled out. He couldn't outrun it though, he could feel it without looking, the unnatural inky black silently slipping over the ground behind him. If he hesitated, if he stopped for a second, made one single mistake, it would capture him.

Every trick he'd tried had only managed to stall them at the very best. Every angle he'd come at the situation with, every ace he'd pulled from his sleeve. All the things that usually succeeded in getting him out of harms way on every previous mission had fallen through.

He had to get away, there was no choice. The information he collected was unquestionably the single most important bit of data he'd ever found. His boss absolutely *had* to get it. All he had to do was outwit his attacker. The question was, *how* ? He'd had yet to see any human being at all, but he wasn't stupid enough not to recognize jutsu when he saw it, especially *powerful* jutsu, *crafty* jutsu. He couldn't do any damage, because the murky shadows took it all. He couldn't just slip around a corner and hide in the darkness, seeing as that was the very thing that was after him. Outrunning it was

impossible as well, his body would tire out long before the inanimate shadows would.

Skidding slightly and making a sharp right he darted into a narrow alleyway, consumed in darkness. He ignored it, it was natural darkness, caused by lack of light, not that inky, living shadow that was pursueing him. There was nothing unsafe about the dark as long as you always had an ace in the hole. Keen eyes scanned the area as he ran along, this was it, this was definitely one of the entrances. Perfect. No one alive could break through his boss's barriers.

A chainlink fence towered over him a short distance away, blocking his path and thusly his escape route. That was okay though, he reasoned, slapping his hands together and making a short series of seals without stopping. He smiled to himself, whatever idiot it was that thought they could stop him was way outmatched here.

His smile dissapeared then at the loud slap of something wet hitting the ground in front of him. He internally swore, unable to stop himself or change his course as the sole of his foot stepped into something that was halfway between liquid and solid. Before he even had time to look down black tentacles erupted and twined themselves about his leg, nearly causing him to break it as his momentum pushed him forward though the appendage was held firmly in place. The bodiless limbs squeezed then so strongly, twined about his leg like a kraken attacking a ship out on the sea. He couldn't help the pained cry that escaped as he heard and felt the POP of his hip dislocating, followed by the splintering *crack* of his knee, and then his ankle.

His scream broke temporarily through the hushed night, softened back to the muffled normalcy by the rain.

The shadow tentacles retreated back into their puddle after he'd collapsed, which seemed to fade away, absorbing into the ground like it'd never been there in the first place.

Panting heavily through gritted teeth, he growled in determination, pushing himself up with only a small pathetic whine at the pain stabbing through him with every movement. He crawled forward like a three-legged dog. He was so close, he just had to get into the safehouse. It was right there, at the junction of the alleys. He could crawl if he had to.

He concentrated chakra in his leg, trying in vain to repair the damage. It was easy enough to get his hip popped back into place. Though the pain neared unbearable, it was over within an instant, and he chuckled for a brief victorious moment before pushing the pale green glow of chakra down his leg to his knee. It was not so easily repaired, seeing as it had literally been crushed. The shards of bone would be impossible to repair in the limited time he had.

It's okay.. he just had to keep crawling. He was almost there. The only obstacle left was the fence.

Movement caught his eye and he rolled instantly, barely dodging another shadow that shot out across the alley and impaled itself in the weak brick of the building. He was forced to the side again as another came darting from the darkness, barely missing his chin and imbedding itself in the wall. He grunted in effort and pain as he scrambled to avoid three more that shot out, effectively pinning him there in a seated position with his back pressed against the brick.

He stayed where he was for a few heartbeats, before pulling a knife out of his pocket and with a snarl, swinging it in a wide arc, slashing a trio of them and rolling to freedom. Cheap tricks like that wouldn't stop him, his mission was far too important. The knowledge in his head was too pertinent for him to be stopped by some faceless enemy.

With his chakra still pooling around his crushed knee and ankle, he hobbled onward, stopping at the chainlink and making the handsigns again. When he completed it he slammed his hand against it and a hole appeared, tunneling backward farther than the fence reached. It

was then that the illusion of the fence and the alley behind it flickered out to reveal nothing but a dead end.

He sneered, all he had to do was step inside and he was home free. And his master would finally know the secret. He would be safe and sound and he could revel in the glory of having gained such astounding information.

He gingerly lifted his injured leg up and through the swirling dark tunnel, but before he could finish, the gleam of a blade caught his attention from the corner of his eye. He moved out of the way only for another one to whip out and slash him across the face. He lost his balance and fell, trying to rub away the stinging in his cheek. Dammit, all these stupid little tricks were getting old. Whoever the hell was after him needed to show themselves. They were toying with him, he knew all too well. He was exhausted and injured and all he had to do was step through the portal and he would be safe, but whoever it was didn't even seem to be worried, seeing as they were just using the shadows to slap at him, delaying his escape.

When he pulled his hand away he winced at the slight smear of blood on his palm, then wiped the back of his hand across it to get rid of the remainder. Just a scratch on the cheek, nothing worth repairing immediately. It's not like it would kill him.

He rolled himself to his feet, holding the hunter's knife defensively in his dominating arm and scooting himself slowly toward his escape route. He stiffed and whirled at the new presence that flickered into existence behind him, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out contact bombs and throwing them blindly. The figure shrouded in darkness only smiled as three shadows vined up around him and quite literally swallowed the bombs, expanding and releasing a small puff of smoke when they went off before retreating back to the ground.

"Kabuto Yakushi... correct?" The man said with a voice that would be smooth as silk, something that could lull someone to sleep if it

weren't for the extreme undertone of 'I-don't-want-to-be-here' underneath.

He tensed at the mention of his name, stiffening back into a defensive position and glaring at the silhouette of his attacker. Finally they show themselves, now he could dispose of them and be on his way. These games had gotten old a *looong* time ago.

"Mm. You don't have to answer. I know it's you." He said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes from one pocket and a flint lighter from the other. He slipped one of them from the pack and popped it into his mouth. "You've been blacklisted, it seems."

The figure stepped forward, flicking the lighter and sneering in the brief macabre light. Slender, clever eyes laughed at him with nothing more than a small crook in the corner of his mouth for a second before he slapped the lid back onto the lighter and returned both items to his pockets. The man known as Kabuto refused to shrink under his presence. He wasn't afraid, he'd seen far more terrifying things than this fool could ever be capable of.

"You've assisted in kidnapping, illegal genetic experimentation, and of course countless murders. You really should be more careful, you know. Leaving fingerprints everywhere."

"Quit the monologging and attack me already. I have places to be. " He replied, repositioning his glasses.

"Hm. You wouldn't say that if you knew what was about to happen to you."

Kabuto remained quiet this time, patiently eyeing the man as he stepped forward again. The silhouette disappeared and the facial features revealed themselves again, wearing the same calm mask that balanced on some line between sadistic pleasure and utter indifference, but it didn't help. He had no idea who this was. A high ponytail, open, black, pocketed vest with no shirt underneath, and what was that pendant around his neck?

No.. wait.. he knew what that was.

"A Jashinist?" He said, raising a white brow. "I didn't think they existed any longer. And I certainly didn't think they were dumb enough to wear it out on their sleeves."

"Ooh you know of Jashin then?"

"I know more than you'd probably be comfortable with me knowing." He replied, smirking in a mock imitation of his attacker.

"Actually, that makes everything easier. Seeing as you're about to meet him."

"Am I? I think you're mistaken."

His attacker smiled, and the cold look in his eyes suddenly melted away by the fire exploding within them. In a flash the man moved forward, Kabuto barely had time to pull out his weapon to block the attack. And no time at all to block the second, seeing as he suddenly couldn't move his body.

"I don't like cocky fuckers like you." His attacker growled, delivering a knee into Kabuto's gut and shoving him backward onto the ground. "You know of Jashin eh? Tell me what happens when I taste your blood then." The spikey haired man said, whipping out a telescopic pike and snapping it downward until it was unretracted. With a quick motion he scraped it across the cut on Kabuto's cheek, and then stepped back.

The victim glared, unwilling to admit that his knowledge on the subject was only bare minimum. Ingesting blood did any number of things though, if he remembered correctly. It was a large part of the religion. He struggled against the shadow hands that restrained him on the ground, wincing in pain when they only squeezed tighter.

"You're lucky I'm not a sadist. So don't forget to thank Jashin Almighty for sending *me* instead of someone else." With that his



attacker extended his tongue and licked the blood from the tip of the weapon, twirling it too fast to see then before grunting as he shoved it through his palm.

Kabuto stared wide eyed as the man's skin changed color right before his eyes, skin turning to the same inky black as the shadows he commanded, broken by the stark white of tribal, skeletal-like markings across his face, chest, and arms.

What.. what the hell was this? His chakra was surging, mixing around and twisting with some other indescribable power in his veins. This.. this wasn't jutsu! It couldn't be! But what was it! It couldn't be possible that there was a forbidden technique he didn't know about... he knew EVERYTHING!

This wasn't part of Jashinism.. was it? It was just some harmless stupid little religion for emo teens and adults with sick, twisted, sexual fantasies. Though, it didn't matter what it was, did it? He would have to put a stop to it, before this man killed him, as he so boldly claimed he was going to. Luckily for him, the best way to stop any attacker is to kill them first.

The skeletal man squeezed a few ridiculously big drops of blood on the ground, smearing them into a circle. More blood fell, and was drawn into a triangle in the middle. The man's face was absolutely expressionless, regarding Kabuto as if he were already a corpse.

Trying to resist the trembling of his hands, the glasses-wearing victim made a handsign with one hand, muttering an incantation word along with it. He imagined the trap set up in the alleyway, not by him but as a safeguard for his boss's employees. One that *should* have been triggered as soon as this spikey haired, religious *nutjob* set foot within three feet of the unmasked portal. Oh well though, at least you could manually activate it, as long as you know how.

But his attacker's eyes didn't shift except for a wince as mechanical sounds pervaded the air and he suddenly had two dozen arrows sticking out of his body, a living pincushion.

Kabuto didn't even have time to smile at the victory before pain erupted within him like a million little daggers. His mouth gaped open in a silent scream, vision blurred in bulging eyes and ears rang. What was this? What was this black magic? He wasn't doing anything more than looking at him and he felt like he'd just been stabbed a hundred times in a hundred places all at once.

He choked out as the tentacles around his body seemed to wriggle in excitement of the severe blinding pain within him. He couldn't blink, he couldn't move his body, stiffened against the agony, he couldn't even suck in a single solitary breath.

"That kind of hurt..." The Jashinist said, cracking his neck. "Any other traps you'd like to set off? More brilliant ideas? You better get it all out of your system before I send you to Jashin."

The shadows restraining the victim shifted and pushed upward, hoisting Kabuto up and restraining him into a standing position, the single shadow wrapped around his leg squeezed tightly, and a pained breath hissed in through clenched teeth. His hands were secured to prevent any more signing, and the spikey-haired man sneered.

"You.." Kabuto gasped finally after forcing his mind to apply his medical skills to himself and numb the pain enough to where he could function, his eyes falling wider still and face going slack. He couldn't think any more, now that the realization had hit him. The man had just been stabbed clean through with 24 arrows, and barely even flinched. And yet *he* was the one feeling the deadly pain from it.

He knew who this was now. It was the very person he'd been trying to collect data on, the one who'd gained immortality through that man his boss had spoke about. The one who couldn't die by meer physical attacks alone.

This was... the *other immortal*.

"I grant you this soul, Jashin, stained throughly with the blood of others, the weight of it should suffice you for another month. I ask for your continued blessing, and thank you for all you've done for me already." The man said in monotone, bowing his head slightly after taking the cigarette out of his mouth and flicking it off into the shadows.

Kabuto choked, the wall behind the immortal man flickered, and then died, returning to the image of a chain-link fence. Shit, what was he going to do, he couldn't move even if he *weren't* restrained. He *had* to get this information to his master, whether he died or not, it was crucial. And now, he even met the man. If he could survive, everything would go so perfectly.

But.. he wasn't going to. He had no other tricks up his sleeve. He'd never thought in a million years that the immortal would come after him himself. To be brutally honest, he hadn't even been completely convinced that the silver-haired, pink-eyed one had existed, let alone a *second* one.

The immortal man, chuckling, lifted the pike above his head. "My body is your vessel, Jashin." He said quietly, and Kabuto watched, time slowing down, his heartbeat thundering in his ears as he swung the weapon down toward his own chest. It registered just before flesh parted that this was a sacrifice. That *he* was a sacrifice. That this was the never-seen-because-no-one-survived ritual that only the highest of priests could perform. And he realized with tears welling up that he had been doomed from the second he'd been asked to do this task. No one with a secret as huge as this would simply let someone walk off with the knowledge that Kabuto had.

Another explosion of pain erupted within him, searing and burning to the point where he thought his body might just combust and turn to ash. He couldn't even scream. He couldn't do anything but stare dumbly at a laughing skeletal man, unable to hear anything other than his own slowing heartbeat reverberating in his eardrums.

No.. no. He had to.. to get the knowledge.. to..

He couldn't do it, he couldn't even think.

He had nothing left. He was going to die. He had failed.

Dammit..

One last beat, one last wheeze, and his eyes rolled backward.

The world went black.

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Shikamaru continued laughing, unable to understand why he was doing such a thing, but not really willing to find out. It happened every time, after all. Every time he saw the surrender in their eyes, the recognition of their own death. When he watched as they gaped at him, trying to understand what he was, what was happening.

He couldn't help himself but laugh.

Fucking *heathens*.

It's what they got, what they deserved. He delivered them unto Jashin, and they would be judged before a God. They would see for themselves that he was real, and they would cry and repent for their actions like the pathetic athiests they were. They would cower in fear and plead for mercy before they were devoured.

His laughter slowed to the point where he could control himself again, and he quickly pulled the giant stake from himself, gritting his teeth against a moan of pleasure that threatened to escape him. And now he had to pull all these arrows out... Damn. The ritual wasn't going to last that long. Which meant this was really going to hurt.

He retracted the weapon and put it back into it's small clip on his belt, sighing in exhaustion as Jashin accepted the soul, and the ritual ended, letting his skin pale back to it's usual color.

"Ooww..." He said aloud, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fucking arrows... seriously?" He muttered, grabbing the head of one sticking out of his chest. Inhaling sharply, he yanked it out and let it fall to the ground, growling under his breath as he tried to numb the pain, waiting for his body to begin healing.

Oh, that smarts.

"One down. A shitload more to go."

Getting used to being immortal hadn't been much of a challenge, the hardest part was fighting the urge to pass out momentarily when his heart was pierced or his skull cracked open.

It was always the part *after* the battle that ended up being the worst. After the thrill and adrenaline were gone, after the ritual ended and any remaining wounds were left to be dealt with. Normally being in ritualistic mode instantly healed everything, but if his body was still pierced, obviously it couldn't repair itself. And so now he was left with nothing but his self-training and largley increased pain tolerance to get him through the cleanup process. He'd made a mental note to ask Hidan how the hell he still enjoyed it when not in ritual skin, and was reminded every time he had to go and make one of these troublesome offerings.

Four more bloody arrows were on the ground at his feet now. And another clattered down after a short outburst of swears. This was a slow process, he unhappily admitted to himself. That Kabuto bastard didn't really put up much of a fight, but he'd had one hell of a devious mind. The pursuit of him so far had been a tedious one. He was a quick little shit, smart and unafraid to cause pain to anyone who got in his way. 2 normal civillians had been injured in the nerd's failed escape schemes.

He had been unusually prepared, actually. It was weird, as if he'd known someone would be after him. Then again, the guy was some sort of spy or something. And obviously he hadn't expected an

immortal. It made him ponder briefly on what kind of information he'd been gathering before Shikamaru had put a stop to it.

Hm. Well, it didn't matter anyway. Jashin had his sacrifice and he could go back to his normal life. Or... what had become normal. Moving from place to place, sneaking into abandoned buildings, or old bunkers, and staying there until the time came when a sacrifice was due. And by then he'd already narrowed his choices down to three people. Whoever he found first was instantly targeted.

It was a little bit of a drag really, having to sneak around from place to place, hack into computers and look up information. He almost had grown to despise technology, made everything so troublesome.

But that's what happened when you tried to turn being a murderer into being some twisted form of vigilante. It was work. Being a good person was always the hard road, protecting was always the more difficult choice. And he knew that more than anyone. That's why he was in this whole stupid mess in the first place. Damn, it sucked to have morals. Hopefully he'd be able to ignore them after a few centuries..

"Gaah Son-of-a-biiitch!" He snarled, when one arrow decided to snag itself on something inside him. There literally could not be a worse place to get a splinter, seriously. He only had 13 more left now, and the first few holes had already stopped bleeding. He took a moment to brace himself further, and with a grimace he yanked again. It came out, but not without tearing something. Blood squirted in an almost hilariously fake display from the wound, like the over-the-top effects one would see in an old, poorly-funded movie. If it didn't hurt so fucking bad he might have taken the time to enjoy the weird humor of the moment.

"You're lucky you're already dead." He growled through his teeth to the corpse.

And then he blinked. He'd forgotten to undo the shadow jutsu, which continued to restrain his latest victim. But not only that... He mentally

kicked himself. Why was he doing this the hard way?

He took a breath and closed his eyes, and at his silent command the three-dimensional shadows removed themselves from the body, discarding it like a sack of rotten potatoes and wormed up his own, grasping the few remaining ends of the arrow by the heads. He took one more heartbeat to brace himself yet again before snapping his eyes open. Taking the cue, all the remaining foreign bodies were removed from him all at once.

He made a slight choking sound and slapped his hand over his mouth at the pain. But after standing motionless for a good ten minutes and focusing on his breathing, he was okay again.

Well. That certainly moved things along quicker.

He sighed and clapped his hands, finally stepping from his Jashin circle and over all the discarded arrows. He still couldn't believe Kabuto had used something so primitive... But then again, it would have been effective enough were he not unkillable.

He stretched, and took the time to pop his back before grabbing both arms of the limp body and slinging it up over his shoulder. All that was left now was taking him to an exchange point.

Yeah.. the *vigilante* thing to do was drop him off at the police station, but hey, just because he was immortal didn't mean he liked starving. And he might as well get paid for all his efforts.

Kabuto was a wanted man too. He'd bring in at least a couple months worth of money, if not more. It was surprisingly easy to make it last when you didn't have bills, or car insurance, or rent, or any of those other annoying little money vaccums.

Pushing chakra into his feet, he launched himself upward, landing on the two story roof with only one extra push off the opposing wall. Before taking off he turned around and looked down at the mess he'd made of the alleyway, tsk'ing.

"Clean it up guys." He ordered, and one the command two living shadows ever-so-slowly pulled free of the walls, plopping onto the ground and pulling themselves up on twig-like legs. With mouths akin to anteaters, they moved forward, one sucking the arrows up like a vacume and the other melting into a puddle and running in a small trickle to cover the blood circle and the other miscellaneous spatters. Smoke fizzled from the ground momentarily as it vaporized the evidence, and Shikamaru, nodding in satisfaction, turned and went of his way, speeding along the rooftops in a blur with a dark purple meteor tail fading out behind him.

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4 hours later he sat on the edge of the tallest building in town. A not-so-impressive 15 story that pointed in a pyramid upward at the top, giving the Jashinist perched on the small ledge something to lean back against.

He inhaled from the cigarette in his mouth, exhaling through his nose into the chilly night air. The sun would be rising in a few more hours, and he would retreat back to his safehouse to rest for a few days before he picked up and moved on to a new city or town.

He'd rather enjoyed his stay in this one. It was rather pretty, being older and more rustic looking. Most of the buildings had that back-in-the-day feel to them, and he might guess they were more than a couple decades old. Not so old that they were disgusting and falling apart, but enough to give him a strange sense of welcome...

It was just big enough to send a glow of light up in the night sky, reflecting off the clouds and creating a heavenly sort of picture. And it was small enough to where the smog stayed mostly near the ground. On his post so high up, the air was crisp and refreshing.

He sighed and flicked the smouldering filter of his cigarette off the edge of the small-time skyscraper, putting his arms behind his head and leaning back on them like a pillow.



It wasn't such a bad life, being a rogue. Once he'd gotten past his first sacrifice, (an absolute mess *that* had been,) everything sort of fell into place. Now that he generally knew what to expect he sometimes wondered why the hell he hadn't ever thought to do this sooner. There were no deadlines to meet, no places to be, no one to worry about but himself. The doldrums of the average life didn't affect him at all. He was free in every sense of the word.

Of course there were things that he missed. A comfy bed, refrigerators, the occasional television, the satisfaction of knowing where you'll be going to sleep at night after night, and some occasional company that wasn't a shadow puppet or dead body... but they were all just luxuries that could be easily lived without, as long as you had things to distract yourself with. And hobbies were something that continued to elude him, except for working out, planning his next sacrifice, polishing his few weapons, smoke-bombs, and continuously working on improving his techniques, he still didn't have much of a life...

He didn't need a good mattress to sleep on, seeing as his body healed so quickly now that each morning he woke up feeling perfect no matter what kind of surface he spent the night on. And food was never hard to come by, honestly. He always had enough cash on hand to keep himself going.

Technically he didn't need *anything* but the clothes on his back. But speaking just of the mentality of things, it was nice to at least pretend he was human. To have the few normalities of the everyday life and not existing in the same, monotonous little bubble in time. Simple things like a change of clothes were a comfort. Especially when you literally had to break into places just to take a shower.

Not to say he wasn't human... but there were a lot of long nights he'd spent just pondering over his new life, his abilities... and it always came down to one thing. He was one of two people on the entire earth who could not die. And that alone put him in another species category.

He wondered a lot too of the future. How things would be when he'd outlived everyone he knew, outlived their children and their grandchildren... How things might change, how he'd have to adapt...

And it was thoughts like these that always made him think of Hidan. However old he technically was... He'd entertained himself with the thought of the man living faar back in time, changing along with the flow of society. Hidan in a suit of armor, Hidan in a rainbow sancho and half moon glasses, Hidan in bellbottoms, Hidan in an Elvis suit! Usually it was too hilarious to even think about and so he wrenched his train of thought away, most times only for it to meander its way right back to the immortal.

It was troublesome, in a way. But also comforting. He wouldn't outlive *everyone* he knew...

He smiled to himself and closed his eyes, inhaling deeply from the cancer stick. Today was exactly six months from when he'd made the deal. It was the day he'd written on piece of paper and had one of his shadow minions deliver. And there were only a few hours until daylight.

It was a good thing Jashin didn't go by conventional time, or Hidan and himself would both be dead.

That crazy albino... Shikamaru was only vaugley concerned as to whether he'd show or not. And honestly it wasn't even corncern for his life. Nope, he just wanted to see him. He so far beyond his denial that when he'd thought about how much he'd fought his feelings for the zealot it made him want to laugh out loud... and maybe punch something. He couldn't have just enjoyed it, could he? That short little amount of time he'd had. He had to sit there worrying about how wrong it was, about how Neji would react, about all that stupid bullshit that hadn't made any difference in the end anyway.

And now he was in a whole different boat. Instead of trying to convinve himself he didn't love Hidan, he was trying to contain the emotions that continued to force their way into his brain whenever he

thought of the man. The happy content he'd felt, as well as the anger he still couldn't rid himself of after the bastard had chosen Kakuzu.

So yes, he was all too eager to see him.

And to fight him.

Spontaneous new jutsu's and techniques had made themselves available to Shikamaru. And though his sacrifices occasionally put up a good fight, he was excited to get to really test them out. And he wasn't going to go easy on Hidan either, the zealot was going to have to work his ass off if he wanted his blood. Call it teasing or flirting or whatever you want, but he was going to prolong this reunion as long as possible.

... If he showed up... that is.

Dammit, surely he wouldn't forget! And surely he would be able to track the Nara down, especially if the revered tracker Kakuzu assisted. He hadn't made it too incredibly hard to follow his trail... Did he?

He wasn't overestimating the moron was he?

Damn, he'd be really, REALLY pissed if he didn't show. And also dead... But mostly just pissed.

"Where the fuck are you..." He mumbled almost inaudibly, opening his eyes just in time to catch the shadow moving on its own out of the corner of his eye.

Hmm. That certainly wasn't his.

He grinned widely and internally leaped in joy before sighing and activating his shadow possession. The shadow anomaly was caught with ease, and there was only a single heartbeat of silence until curses exploded into the air behind him.

He smiled and tipped his head backward to find a dark cloaked man holding a scythe over his head, his body trembling slightly in his efforts to escape Shikamaru's hold on him. His eyes met shaded violet under the hood of the cloak, and he held the teasing stare as long as he could before the upside-down man above him gritted his teeth in a grimace.

"Goddamit, quit staring at me!"

"You seriously think you can just sneak up on me? I see we still haven't grown any brains..."

"You Shithead! Just let me down! My fucking arms are getting tired!"

"Were you going to cleave my fucking skull in two or what!?"

"Hey, it's not like it's gonna kill you!"

"Yeah but that's just gross, and it would probably piss me off."

Finally he stood up, mimicing Hidan's stance and switching the jutsu into mime-mode. Casually he forced Hidan to toss his unimpressive single bladed scythe over the side of the building, receiving a growl in response. He deactivated the Jutsu while simultaneously diving out of the way. Just as expected, he dodged a blow from Hidan's red-hazed hand, turned into a weapon with nothing but condensed chakra.

"Have you learned any new tricks?" Shikamaru said, dodging two more swings and then delivering a kick of his own. Hidan not only blocked it but caught him by the ankle, sneering before a red-laced shadow tentacle extended from his arm and wrapped itself around Shikamaru's leg. His eyes widened and he struggled to get away, but he hardly had time to move before his opponent heaved and he was flung into the air, rising several feet in an arc and slammed into the vertical wall on the other side of the building.

He spit a wad of blood out and coughed, mentally kicking himself for being arrogant before he was tossed again, Hidan's stolen control over the shadows acting almost like one of Kakuzu's arm extensions. Hah, of course he would imitate the old man. They'd probably been working together to train him up all this time. It wasn't as if Shikamaru and Hidan's born-again lover were on good standings with each other. Surely the bastard would donate a little bit of time to make sure Hidan gave the Nara a good beating during their reunion.

Damn. He hadn't even considered that.

He grunted again, drowned out by the shattering of glass as he was slammed into the other side of the building, and immediatly condensed chakra in his hand. When he was lifted back up moments later he waited just until he was hovering over the silver-hair of his opponent before making a little shadow whip of his own and snaking it around his opponents neck, simultaneously breaking the grip of the other tentacle with a quick slash from a chakra foot-blade.

Using his momentum as he fell back down and landed safely on the roof, he flung Hidan up into the air, letting him go at the last second instead of slamming him into anything. Without hesitation he bounded to the edge of the roof, leaping out pocahontas-style and flipped, pooling chakra in his legs. Hidan came flailing down just as he coiled his thighs and kicked, nailing him perfectly in the chest and sending out a ripple of air as the zealot was flung backward and went crashing down onto the roof of another lower building, just barely managing to break the tumble before he skidded off it as well.

Using Shadow whips as a grappeling hook, Shikamaru Spiderman'd his way over to land on the roof, not sparing even a millisecond after his feet touched concrete to charge. He opened his hand behind him and pumped chakra into the seal sewn into his fingerless glove, wrapping his hand around the staff of the weapon that flashed into existance with a small burst of deep purple. Hidan's eyes went wide for only a second before they were replaced with anger, and he pulled out one of his telescopic pikes and extended it just in time to block the attack, locking the two in a grapple.

"YOU LITTLE SHIT! You stole my fucking scythe!?" He said half in anger and half in amusement.

Shikamaru smirked and pushed away, pinwheeling the giant weapon before slamming the butt to the concrete. "Yeah. You really didn't suspect it all this time?"

"Son of a-Goddammit Pineapple head I fucking tore that city apart looking for it!"

"Well. Finders, keepers."

Hidan's eyes narrowed and he jetted forward with chakra enhanced speed. With a simple swing of the scythe he was forced to stop and flip to the side, and then again when the weapon continued swooping back and forth at him.

Shikamaru smiled, once you were used to it, it was actually one hell of a weapon, and with the 'improvements' he'd made to it, there was no way he was letting the albino reclaim it.

"I'll fucking *take* it back!"

"I'd like to see that."

"How the fuck did you get so good at handling it so fast!?"

Shikamaru retracted the weapon, sending a quick pulse of chakra into it while whipping it forward. With a long string of clicks, the once solid staff of the weapon broke into millions of little segments, creating a flexible spine and transforming the triple bladed scythe into a completely new weapon. Hidan gawked for half a second too long before trying to get away, and the weapon wrapped around Hidan's torso, with the three blades impaling him as an anchor right through the gut.

A choked grunt of pain sounded briefly before, with a flick of his wrist, Shikamaru retracted the spined scythe and pulled Hidan

roughly up close.

"I've had a lot of time to practice." He said lowly, doing his best not to sound bitter.

"What'd you fucking do to my scythe!?" Hidan growled in his restraint.

"Upgraded it. You like it? No need for a flimsy little retractable cord now."

With that he snapped the cord upward, throwing his opponent into the air, spinning like a top. The blades ripped free of the silver-haired Jashinists abdomen, sending out a spiral of blood and dazzling Shikamaru with the morbid beauty of the attack.

He stared a little too long, it turned out, and by the time he'd slung the weapon back to reattach to Hidan the zealot had recovered in midair, grabbed the end of the weapon tucked it under his feet, managing to run along the outstretched spine like a tightrope.

*That's not even physically possible!* His head screamed, unable to force any other thought out in time to dodge the chakra hazed punch Hidan delivered right to the side of his face, gripping the weapon firmly with his other hand and tearing it from the Nara's grasp as he went careening over the edge of the building.

Hm. Hidan's warnings about getting cocky had rung true after all.

Hah. But not really.

Intentionally chomping down on his tongue and restarting the bleeding as he plummeted, he worked up a wad of blood and spit into his hand, sending a small surge of chakra to activate the seal on his glove once more. Initially summoning the weapon didn't demand payment, seeing as he kept it in a specially designed locker that Jashin designed for him between planes of reality. But transporting it

out of one reality and taking it to a different spot in the same one wasn't such an easy process, and therefore required a little blood.

Immediately the scythe phased back into his hand and he launched it without hesitation, letting it break through a window and latch onto the brick. He had just pulled himself to a stop and planted his feet onto the side of the building when a pale blur came racing straight down, crashing into him and once again severing his hold on the weapon.

Punches and kicks were exchanged in midair before Shikamaru, still being slightly more agile, managed to maneuver himself on top of Hidan, pushing off against his stomach just before the pale immortal collided with the concrete.

He landed softly, thanks to a certain psycho breaking the fall for him. And he sent one more chakra drip into his hand and the sealing circle, banishing the weapon back to its holding cell. If he couldn't keep ahold of the damn thing then it would just be a nuisance.

"YOU'RE REALLY STARTING TO *PISS ME OFF* !" Came Hidan's snarl from the still dusty crater, and again a blur raced outward from the smoke, both hands and both feet aflame with red chakra. Shikamaru took a half-second to spit out a wad of blood and pulled out his own telescopic pike and snapped it to full extension before swinging. It slashed right through the albinos neck before he poofed out of existence.

Eyes widening, Shikamaru ducked, feeling the air from his attackers swipe behind him and absently noting the few black hairs that floated to the ground in front of him. He dropped his legs under him and backward and pushed with his arms, successfully sliding himself beneath the man's legs and rising up behind him, snaking a shadow tentacle around his neck and yanking him back and down by the throat.

Hidan's head smashed into the ground only for him to poof away into the air again. Brows furrowing, Shikamaru whipped around in time to



sidestep a swipe of the zealots pike and grab his arm, slamming it into a raised knee right at the elbow. It cracked audibly and his opponent released an angry yelp, not stopping for even a millisecond to tend to his wound before whirling into a roundhouse.

Shikamaru whirled too, ducking low and extending his leg, successfully catching the fellow Jashinists ankles and maneuvering the weapon from his hands before he was sprawled on his back. Without hesitation Shikamaru poured chakra into his weapons and spun both pikes in his hand like batons before lifting them up and slamming each one down through a broad shoulder and into the cement below.

Hidan's body stiffened as he fought through a seizure, glaring daggers at the Nara with gritted teeth and bug eyes.

Giving the man the best amused grin he could work up, he stepped back and regarded him with feigned boredom, even going so far as to pull out a cigarette and light it, exhaling a puff of smoke just as the albino's body relaxed onto the ground.

"Dammit..." Hidan panted, reaching up to yank one of the stakes from his shoulder. "Would you just hold the fuck still?" He gave a half-moan at the sickening sound of the weapon pulling free of him, and went to repeat the action with the other.

"Where's the fun in that?" The Nara replied, pausing to take another drag. "Maybe you should quit fuckin' around and get serious." Holding the cigarette between his lips, he dashed forward right as Hidan rose to his feet. He wouldn't give him the chance to make any more clones. That was seriously starting to get annoying. He rushed him, pulling out two of his special chakra blades that resembled bronze knuckles with knife-like extensions and alighting them with purple-black flames.

He gave an extra boost to his feet, vaguely put off by the fact that Hidan didn't seem to care that he was being charged at. The notion was knocked away when movement caught his eye and he had to

suddenly avoid a minefield of tarry puddles, the same trap he'd just used on his most recent sacrifice. Even getting near one would result in those 3D shadows shooting up to bind you in place.

While he weaved through the traps, Hidan started running in an arc around them, whipping out the tangible shadow extensions as he did and flinging them at Shikamaru, creating more distractions as he tried to maneuver through a mine-field and dodge the whip-like attacks being thrown at him.

Stopping on a dime and whirling, the Nara let loose a dark wave that rippled out from his body, avoided easily by Hidan with a leap into the air. Smiling to himself, he twirled one of his blades around a single finger, taunting. And reacting as he planned, an angered albino landed on the ground and charged.

Quickly he chucked the blade at Hidan's shadow, causing the psycho to come to sudden stop and roar in anger after a few seconds of labored breathing. He glared at Shikamaru for a heartbeat, breathing heavily. The Nara could practically see the gears turning in his head.

He honestly was just a little disappointed, his opponent had the ability to copy and manipulate everything that Shikamaru himself was capable of, and yet he didn't seem to be experimenting even. Then again, maybe he didn't know what all he could actually do.

He'd just taken a breath to say something he heard the fast-paced footfalls behind him, then twirling out of the way and missing having his head cleaved open yet again by only a hair. The cigarette held between his lips took the damage instead, cut off down nearly to the filter.

He spit out the end and slashed at what he could only assume was Hidan's shadow minion swinging the previously discarded scythe that Hidan had started out with. They locked in a grapple again, and Shikamaru broke it by throwing his foot up to hit the monster in the groin. His foot only ghosted through it, something he mentally kicked

himself about when the inanimate being hopped away and raced toward its restrained master.

Shika started immediately after it, but it moved with the speed of light, or... the absence of it. In the blink of an eye it plucked the blade from the ground, taking the time to hand Hidan both weapons before fading from existence.

The spikey haired Jashinist continued his charge, leaping up and flipping over his opponent when the scythe was swung low. The albino continued the swing in a complete circle, arcing it higher and forcing Shika to duck under it. He slashed with his own remaining blade at Hidan's abdomen, who tossed the large weapon into the air and side-stepped the attack, claspings onto Shikamaru's wrist and yanking him forward.

Caught off guard by this, he stumbled forward and was grabbed by the waist and hoisted up onto Hidan's shoulder. Alarm bells rang in his head when he was restrained by his own stolen jutsu, inky black ropes wrapping around his ankles, knees, elbows and wrists.

"What the hell are you doing!?" He shouted, squirming in the humiliating position as the scythe came falling back down, snatched from the air by the zealot as he started slowly down the street.

"I caught you. You're my hostage now. So quit wiggling around."

"Fucking put me down Hidan!"

"Nope. Got a sacrifice to make, and times running out."

Shikamaru sighed loudly, letting his body fall limp. He could probably get out of this easily enough, but Hidan was right, time was running short and they'd done a lot of damage to city property... it would be a good idea to remove themselves from the scene.

"Do you really have to carry me like this? I pretty much just kicked your ass, this is embarrassing."

"That's what fucking happens when you steal my shit." The zealot replied calmly. "Maybe if you would have held the fuck still and let me cut you it could have been over and done with."

"I'll cooperate if you let me down."

"Not a chance Pineapple head, I caught you fair and square."

The Nara rolled his eyes. That was a dissapointingly undramatic end to the fight, being carried off like a prize. Where the hell were they going anyway? He voiced the question aloud only to be roughly repositioned on the muscled shoulder.

"Somewhere private." Came the robotic reply.

The prisoner's skin crawled pleasantly at this. Going somewhere private to perform a sacrificial bonding ritual? How morbidly romantic.

Seriously though, he couldn't help the jolt of excitement that shot through him at the small flicker of hope. Did Hidan break up with Kakuzu? Had he finally come to his senses?

"Why?" He said, clearing his throat and inwardly cringing at the obvious fangirlish excitement that leaked out with just the single word.

"Keep your panties on. We just need to talk. I... remembered some stuff.."

"Remembered...?"

"Yeah. Got fucking cotton in your ears?"

Shikamaru remained silent, chewing on his lip in thought. What the hell could he have possibly remembered that he felt inclined to voluntarily tell the fellow Jashinist. And judging by his demeanor it wasn't exactly something positive. Had he recalled something during

their brawl? Or was all this just a cover-up for some other means of shennanigans?

He furrowed his brow at the thought. It better not be, or he was going to beat the shit out of him all over again.

"Can't believe you fucked up my scythe..."

"I made it better." He mumbled back.

"You have any fucking idea how long I've had that thing?"

"Awwe, I didn't know you thought of it like a security blanket."

"Never mind.. just shut up." The albino growled, again repositioning Shikamaru.

"Make me." He replied, yelping when his ass was suddenly smacked harder than any normal person could. Holy fuck taht was going to bruise!

"Now shut up."

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A/N-

Hmm. Not so sure how happy I am with this as a start, I've had this done actually for quite a few days, since my birthday actually, which was a week ago. But I wanted to go over it like 30 times to make sure I was satisfied with it. But I haven't had 5 goddamn seconds to fucking sit down and do anything. Even right now I'm rushing.

I just really hate life sometimes guys. Bleh.

Anyway, uh, yeah so, mer. I don't know what else to say so, here you are.

Enjoy, thanks for reading, I love you, forgive typos, and most of all Please, Please, Please, PLEASE! Leave me a review. I'm sooo

unmotivated right now guys.. I need it.

# Forever bonds

## Come What May

**A/N- Warning, sexual content.**

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He was dropped roughly onto a stone floor finally, his complaints ignored by the silver-hair as he snapped his fingers and the shadow restraints puffed away.

Hidan turned and moved to the wall, pushing shut the heavy door of the sacrificial chamber.

"Do you just carry a map around of these places or what?" Shika said, rubbing at the pressure marks on his elbows.

"They're not hard to find once you know what to look for." He replied, resting the sorry excuse for a scythe against the wall. "You know those stars in the circle you sometimes see graffiti'd on walls? Well the one's that look kinda lopsided on the left side, and have a little tic mark on the bottom right of the innermost triangle are an extension of the Jashin symbol. It's code, saying 'Theres one around here somewhere.'"

Shikamaru stared with both interest and dissapointment. Damn, every time he thought he was up to date on this religion he found out all this random trivia. Why the hell wasn't Jashin teaching him this shit?

Oh wait... Hidan was supposed to be his teacher.. right.

"You have to train your brain to pick up on weird things like that. Like those pictures that have images hidden inside the picture but you have to stare at it for three hours before you see it." He came and sat beside Shikamaru, his charcoal cloak billowing around him, pulling out the ceremonial dagger that Neji had stolen to try to kill

Hidan with, then abandoned after he'd nearly killed Shika. Serious violet eyes looked up and locked onto dark, cautious ones. The spikey haired Jashinist hadn't moved from the spot he was dropped in, because his elder cult member was acting extremely strange. Not only had he not sworn since the fight ended, but the tone of his voice was so calm and level... Like he'd taken sanity pills this morning.

"You'll learn after a decade or so... Maybe sooner, since you catch onto shit so fast." He spun the weapon in his hand, staring at it almost somberly.

Shikamaru studied him. This wasn't right, it was just *unnatural* for the psycho to act this way. And now that he really thought about it, he hadn't seemed all that normal while they were battling either. What the hell could possibly get this kind of reaction from him?

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He blurted out, causing only lightly surprised violet to snap up to him. That look was quickly replaced by obvious reluctance, Hidan chewing on the inside of his lip being the key tell.

"You said you remembered something. What did you mean? Like something you forgot to tell me about Jashin or what?"

"No. Well.. kind of. But not really."

"What the hell does that mean!?"

"Would you shut your fucking hole for a second!" The albino snapped, marveling Shikamaru with an even shorter fuse than usual. "I don't really know how to... explain it..."

The Nara took an irritated breath and let it out slowly. Explain.. he wanted to explain something. But really, what the hell could it be?

"Well.. what's it about?"

"... My past."



"Okay well why do you feel the need to explain your past all the sudden?"

Hidan looked up at him again with a distant, pained expression, and his heart immediatly lurched with the realization that this topic, whatever it was, was something very personal and difficult to discuss for the immortal man. And this realization clicked on not only the Nara's curiosity, but it turned the lights back on in the vault where'd he'd shoved away his feelings for Hidan. Just that alone nearly made him want to reach out and hug the man. How could he have forgotten how hard he'd fallen?

Dammit.. the real question is how could he let himself remember? No matter how this visit lasted, it was still just a visit. And his Hidan would return back to the money-grubbing bastard of a man that he claimed to love.

"It's... about the day I... was reborn. I remembered it, and everything that happened before it... Made for a really shitty day actually." He half-chuckled at the last bit, a forced laugh if the Nara had ever heard one. Aside from that, Hidan lowered his gaze yet again, this time moving the blade of the dagger to his palm and slitting it open as if it were as natural an action as breathing.

*It is natural for a Jashinist..* Shikamaru reminded himself. But why would his Jashinist teacher feel the need to share that with him? Wouldn't he be more inclined to tell Kakuzu? Or was it just the need to be with someone of the same religion..

Hidan suddenly cleared his throat, slashing open his other palm and making a sacrificial circle in one fluid motion. "I think you're... uh.. what's the word.. You were a person once but you died, and now you're back."

Blinking, Shikamaru raised a brow. "Reincarnated?"

"Yeah! That's it."

"Uh.. okay. I didn't know Jashinists believed in that sort of stuff."

"We don't. But... dammit this is going to sound so fucking stupid..."

"Just say it."

Hidan looked up at him again, in a way he'd never been regarded by the zealot before. It was as if Shikamaru wasn't just 'Pineapple head', as if he wasn't just another Jashinist, as if he wasn't just a replacement for Kakuzu.

He looked at him like someone he loved. Someone he cared so deeply about that it almost hurt. Someone who's profound affection nearly haunted them..

"You were there."

The silence after this stretched on forever, Shikamaru himself absolutely reeling from the statement as well as the intense emotion that was just so wrong for Hidan to be exerting. In all the time they'd spent together that half a year ago, even with that last passionate kiss, those violet eyes had never looked so... so.. indescribably *full*. It was like there was some previously hollow spot in them that had recently been filled. They looked complete, they looked bright, they looked... sane. There was no more confusion in his world, no more inner turmoil, no more questions still left floating around, unanswered. Every piece had clicked itself into place and he once again had a purpose, *A reason* for being incapable of death.

"What do you mean?" He asked, at a loss for anything else to respond with other than sarcasm, which would undoubtedly piss the unusually calm man off.

"I mean, You were there. I remember it. It wasn't you... but it was. Hundreds of years... But it's like it was yesterday. I... I can't get it out of my head now..." He absently rolled the tip of the dagger in his bloody palm. Shikamaru stared emotionlessly at him, unable to completely process all this.

"You were the one who did it." Hidan said, just barely above a whisper.

"The one who did what?"

Eyes overflowing with anxiety and uncertainty flicked to his, locking Shikamaru in a gaze so heavy he almost felt as if he couldn't breathe. "Made me immortal."

Again the world and everything that made sense exploded into chaotic oblivion. His first thought was naturally to deny it, to assume Hidan was crazy and screwing with him. But.. the zealot didn't look like he was kidding. In fact he looked just as disturbed by this as Shikamaru himself. He tried frantically to realign his thoughts, to try and get himself to accept these questionable facts. But he couldn't, he simply couldn't believe such a wild story without going into further detail. As if hearing his thoughts, the immortal man took a deep breath and continued.

"Your name was different. I... I can't remember it... I should be able to but I can't. But it was definitely you. Your eyes, the hair, the face, your voice... everything. I know it was..." Suddenly he reached forward, snatching the Jashinist's wrist and quickly dragging the ridiculously sharp blade across his palm. The Nara hissed a breath in at the action, but started massaging the blood into a pool in his hand without even having to think about it.

"You traded your soul to save me after the villagers tried to burn me alive..." He continued, staring at Shika's pooling blood. "You.. killed and sacrificed our Master to do it. He was the first immortal, but you figured out how to do it.. I'm not surprised really, if anyone could it would be you." Once more their eyes met, Hidan's almost pleading, but for what the Nara was unsure. "You don't remember probably... We were both dying of disease. Street rats that ate other people's trash just to survive, too weak from hunger and all the fucking sickness to take care of ourselves. The only thing that kept us alive was that we were still young. Still nothing more than poor beggars wearing nothing but rags... And then *he* came into town, praising

Jashin aloud. They called him a heathen, a heretic, blasphemous and crazy. He was spouting nonsense, derailing all the bullshit they preached about their stupid fake God and offering them Jashin's bounty. Then they changed it to devil-worshipper, fatally possessed by Satan. The idiots. They all ganged up on him and bent him over a stump and ' *chkt* '!" He said, running his flattened hand over his throat. " But he was still fucking alive! Laughing and curseing them as nothing but a fucking head!" He laughed the last part, staring distantly at the stone wall before his face creased up again. "You grabbed his head, and I dragged his body off. Even then you were a runt, and a stubborn bastard... I was the one that wanted to know more about Jashin. You only went along with it because I forced you..." He paused again, staring so deeply into the novice Jashinists eyes that he thought for a moment that the man was searching his very soul, looking for similarities and trying to convince himself that they were the same person.

"They thought we were going to eat him... so they just let us do it. Fucked up right? We talked to him for hours, waiting for his head to reattach itself. He told us all these stories about Jashin... Blessed us for helping. He said Jashin would heal us if we gave ourselves to him. He would help us punish all those who'd shunned us for who we were... That was the part that interested you. You were an angry, unforgiving little shit.. I don't know how you ended up like this.." He said, gesturing with a wave at Shika's body before his face fell into a scowl again. "Dammit. I can't remember his real name either. We just called him master. But he had the Byakugan... A Hyuga descendant..."

Shikamaru swallowed heavily at his, stopping in the middle of tracing the triangle. That's right, the first immortal had been related to Neji. That's why that whole curse was there. The curse he now held on himself... that wasn't turning out to be a curse so much as a blessing.

Wait a second... *HE* killed Neji's immortal ancestor!? In a past life apparently. To save Hidan... the streetrat friend he ran around with...

It didn't add up. There was still something he was overlooking, something that was most likely glaringly obvious that Hidan hadn't yet mentioned or that he was just too flustered to notice.

"Anyway, he took us under his wing and started teaching us everything he could. After a few years our bodies got stronger, we looked like people again instead of rotting skeletons with skin. We had the strength to steal food instead of having to scavenge, He taught us how to hunt. You always made the traps, and you *always* caught something... It pissed me off, because you'd rub it in my face like the smug asshole you are. Sometimes you even set your dumb little traps in places where you knew I'd walk right into them..." Hidan's voice wavered, and Shika's chest cramped again. He couldn't just be making this up, the psycho would never be so heavily affected by a fake memory. But it was honestly hard to believe though, they'd been friends before he died. It was... it was so unbelievable that he had no choice to believe it.

"But I had to kill them. I did the carving and skinning while you threw up off to the side.. you wouldn't harm a fly, as fucking dead-set on revenge as you were. Not an innocent one at least.."

"What... happened to me?" Shikamaru asked quietly, nearly flinching away when Hidan tensed up and turned his gaze on him so slowly and cautiously that it was almost haunting. The silence before he spoke was so heavy and suffocating that even though it lasted only a second, he felt like he'd just grown a few years older.

"I don't know what made them decide to do it... I guess they'd had enough... I was coming back from skinning some squirrels... because the winter was coming and we had to stock up on fur. Then ten of the men, high standing guys in that stupid little shithole came up out of nowhere and surrounded me. They told me I was a soul lost from God, that I needed cleansed of my sins. I wasn't strong enough to fight off all of them, and I knew I couldn't just run and lead them back to our home or they'd get you too. And our master was out finding a sacrifice..." He took a shaky breath before continuing. "They dragged me to the center of town. Tied me to a

post, pouring that disgusting stinking lard oil all over me... and set me on fire. It fucking hurt, I can still fucking feel it after nearly two hundred years..." He shivered, making the Nara's chest cramp yet again for a second. Burned alive... he was glad he didn't remember this..

"I prayed for Jashin to help me. I prayed for him to hurry up and kill me.. it took so long... it hurt for so long. I couldn't stop screaming, someone was shouting at me, telling me to repent and be saved before I was damned to hell. Stupid fucking hypocritical judgemental homophobic bastards... I'm glad I killed them all..."

Shikamaru blanched. Did he say homophobic? That meant... but wait, that couldn't... no . *No way!*

That was the last straw, it must've been. Back in those times when murder was not murder as long as you were different. Not only were the two boys homeless begging disease ridden orphans, they were taken in by the immortal spawn of the devil, and to top it all off they did things that men 'shouldn't ever do together...'

Dear Jashin... It was all starting to make sense. That.. that was why Hidan had had such a strange interest in him from the moment they met. Why he had fucked with Neji so much. Seeing the two of them together had brought back feelings from a past he didn't remember.

It was why he'd ended up unknowingly seeking Shikamaru out after Kakuzu's disappearance, why he hadn't killed him right away. Why he'd agreed to devote himself, why he'd kissed him in the middle of their prayer... It all stemmed from the memories that had been blocked from his conscious mind as a protective shield, bubbling there in his subconscious and making him feel things and do things without really understanding why. Hidan really *did* have a reason for everything he did... he just didn't realize it.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit! Jashin you evil devious fucking bastard!

"Hidan..." He said gently, surprising himself when he leaned forward and grabbed the strong, pale jaw and forcing their eyes to meet. "You didn't answer my question."

The blanket of pain that cloaked the psycho's eyes immediately had him assuming he had died. But... that was pretty obvious. One can't be reincarnated without losing their life in the first place. However the circumstances of his death must have been dramatic. Something that damn near haunted the usually unbreakable zealot.

"You gave your soul to save mine... Jashin wanted it..."

Shikamaru's lips parted in understanding. Oh... oh wow. That couldn't be right, he was assuming wrong. Jashin wouldn't do that, surely he couldn't be so cruel to one of his very first disciples...

"It was a test of faith, I think. To make sure I was worthy of his gift... He made me. Possessed my body and forced me to do it." His voice caught, and he cleared his throat, closing his eyes tightly.

Shikamaru tried to keep himself breathing calmly, resisting the urge to reach out and console the uncharacteristically vulnerable psycho.

So he was a reincarnation of Hidan's first lover? A perfect copy, it sounds like. A Hyuga had been their master, which explained why, before Hidan, he'd only ever had eyes for Neji. And why there was always the overwhelming desire to protect him, why everything that happened to the Hyuga had been deemed as his fault though there was no logical reason why... he felt the subconscious guilt from killing his ancestor..

And why, even though Hidan was bound by Jashin to kill Neji, he had always held back. He hadn't been able to just walk up to him and kill him there and then. Why he'd slowly tortured them, it was a way to delay the command given by the slaughter God. It was why he'd wanted to give up his faith and just be their friend... and why Jashin couldn't allow it.

It explained why Jashin wanted Shikamaru so badly.. Holy hell the slaughter God had probably been watching him all his life, waiting for the day he'd have a chance. He had been a disciple before, maybe all along. He just had to willingly offer himself...

*"You're so noble, my child. Quite a feat considering all you've been through."* Jashin had said to him. He had saved his dying lovers life before, getting himself killed. And now hundreds of years later he was still putting himself second.

*'Your soul is far too precious.'* Because he'd saved it all these years. Finally putting it back in reality because... because why? That had yet to be explained.

But that was why he'd been so confident in Hidan's feelings. That was why he'd allowed him to take on the curse.

And then when oblivious fucking Hidan had tried to walk away and go to Kakuzu, he'd returned his memory. Revealing everything. Connecting every single thread that had been left hanging loose. Explaining every little detail, things even the keen mind of Shikamaru Nara had overlooked.

They had been Jashinists from the start. Both of them.

They were *meant* to be together. There was nothing any longer that Jashin was going to let get in the way of that.

"Holy shit..." He muttered, lost in thought. Whether he'd snapped or not, he didn't know. But a part of him could almost remember it. He could imagine like he'd been there.

Back when you were lucky to live past your forties... he would have been a teenager, he could see it so perfectly. Rags for clothes, living under an outcropping beside a disgusting creek, shivering from the chill of the rain, looking into a pair of dark eyes so utterly black that they looked more like holes that could suck you right in...



"You... you're eyes were black. Like coal..." He said breathily, eyes like saucers as they stared into the now amethyst.

Hidan's facial expression mimicked his. "You can remember?"

"I.. I don't know. I don't remember it really... it's more like a book that I read once. I can remember it like something someone put into my head... Like a realistic dream where you can't tell if it actually happened or not."

Hidan burst into hysterical laughter then, making Shikamaru jump so violently that his butt left the stoney floor. He stared incredulously at the albino, who looked almost in pain with how hard he laughed.

"What's so fucking funny!?" He almost shouted, a strange anger flaring up slightly. Why the fuck would he be laughing? Did he actually make it up? Was it all some rediculously detailed hoax that Shika had walked right into?

"Everything! All of it!" He said between gasps. "It's like the fucked up shit right out of some cheesy fucking teenage girl romance novel!" He grabbed Shikamaru suddenly by the shoulders and brought his face close, all joviality gone. "History repeats itself. Except this time you and that damn brain of yours. You fixed the problem from last time. You found the fucking loophole and fixed everything without even knowing what you were doing, without me knowing what you were doing, without me knowing what I was fucking doing."

He grinned finally, the signature Hidan grin that had somehow now taken on a whole new meaning, gained so much more depth that Shikamaru ever thought possible. A shiver ran down his spine, and his pulse raced. No, it wasn't a game, or a joke. It wad just such a bizarre situation that even a psycho couldn't help but laugh.

"The perfect Jashinist. Still manipulating hundreds of years after you're gone. No wonder he wanted you so bad..." He licked his lips, and Shikamaru's inside turned upside down. Holy fuck he'd forgotten Hidan's ability to do this to him. And damn did he miss it.

"No wonder / want you so bad..."

*That's it!* His inner voice screamed, all patience and rationalization shattering into a million pieces. The only thing reflecting the utter chaos inside his head was the his suddenly heavy breathing.

Kakuzu could go fuck himself. Hidan would be his, it was decided. It had been decided centuries ago. That old bastard didn't have a chance in hell, this was fate he was dealing with now. He wanted it, Hidan wanted it, and goddammit he didn't care who he had to kill or how he had to do it, but this man was his. End of story.

Rocking forward, he snatched the dagger from Hidan's lap and slipped the blade across his tongue in one smooth movement. There had to be blood exchange for the sacrifice to work, mainly his. And this way he could force Hidan into . It would be literally impossible for the satal masochist to resist.

He grabbed the back of his fellow Jashinist neck, pulling him a little harder than he meant to toward him.

Hidan didn't resist at all and suddenly Shikamaru was on his back, lips pressed against bloody lips with all of the zealots weight pushing down on him, pushing away his surprise at the albinos eagerness and wondering why he'd even expected resistance in the first place. He'd just fucking told him point blank that he wanted Shikamaru.

He moaned into it, not even ashamed this time as he lifted the dagger still in his hands and plunged it into Hidans slowly darkening back. The now black and white skinned man ripped his mouth from Shika's in an ecstatic yelp of mixed pain and pleasure, his back arching and pressing his groin against the Nara's as he yanked the ceremonial tool out and lifted it up to his own mouth, pausing to give Hidan a mischevious grin.

The zealot had not seen him in his ritual skin before, and quite frankly the thought of both of them having it activated in the heat of this moment was making him painfully excited in the lower regions.

A dark glee flashed in those violet eyes, the skeletal marks on his chest heaving from expectation as he silently dared the Nara to do it.

Jashin would still count it right? As long as Shikamaru himself did most of the bleeding.

Well, he would fucking have to. Because there was no way in any of the existing hells that he was going to pass up this opportunity. This was probably what the devious God had been expecting anyway. Like they were really just going to exchange some blood and be merrily on their way... Yeah, riiiiight. Not with their history that he hadn't actually even known existed until a few moments ago.

The corner of his mouth crooking up, he stuck his tongue out and licked the blade slowly, starting at the base and twisting the tip sharply when he reached it to further stimulate his own bloodflow.

Hidan's breath hitched and his eyes nearly bulged out, and the newest immortal beneath him smiled and closed his eyes as that pleasant wave of Jashin's power settled over him. His skin darkened to match the man on top of him and almost in slow motions the white, Voo-doo-esque markings faded in.

Shikamaru's ritual look differed greatly from Hidan's, in the way that instead of bulky, thick markings, his were made more of slender designs that curved and flowed in an almost feminine, but still inherently masculine, design.

Rough hands slid inside Shikamaru's vest, up his abdomen, over his chest, along his collarbone and up his neck to his hairline. With a small tug, his hair was pulled loose of its ponytail and the albino pressed himself ever harder into him, making the Nara moan almost inaudibly as the pain from the rocky floor pushing into him converted itself to pleasure.

"Fucking beautiful..." he muttered, lips brushing against Shikamaru as he spoke and sending another ripple of arousal through his body.

"What about Kakuzu?" Shikamaru whispered back, half-lidded.

"Fuck Kakuzu..." The demon above him breathed, closing the miniscule distance between their mouths. He moaned out loud at the amazing thrill those two words sent ricocheting around in his head, and then again when the devilish tongue snaked its way into his mouth, rubbing against the cuts he'd made on his own, little pinches of pain that turned to glorious sparks of pleasure.

His hips bucked slightly, getting ground into so wonderfully hard by Hidan's after a muffled growl from deep in the sadists throat.

Oh Jashin, this was so perfect. It couldn't be any moreso. They literally were meant to each other, the psycho and the genius, bound together for eternity. Was there anything more teeth-rottingly sweeter than that?

He clamped down on Hidan's lower lip, smirking at the groan it received and revelling in the taste of copper that leaked into his mouth. Hidan shifted after pulling from Shika's grip and bared his teeth in a twisted smile, rolling his hips and diving down to the Nara's exposed neck simultaneously, chuckling at the gasp that slipped from his once-again lover when those unique fangs cut into coal-colored skin.

Abandoning the dagger, Shikamaru reached up to Hidan's shoulderblades, raking his nails all the way down the taut, muscled back and sneaking the edges of his fingers inside Hidan's pantline. He followed the material around the edges, ghosting the tips of his fingers over hipbones, and smiling at the shiver that rippled through the no-longer-albino on top of him.

*Hah. I can do it too.* He thought victoriously. Hidan wasn't the only one who could get people hot and bothered.

The elder immortal pushed himself backward, lifting himself off Shikamaru and giving him access to the zipper while running his own

tongue diagonally up the Nara's stomach and chest, wrapping those wicked lips around his nipple.

Shikamaru's eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head at the act, and he moaned loudly, resisting the urge to arch into it. That would make it rather difficult to get these fucking pants off, now wouldn't it?

He fiddled frantically with the first button, receiving a chuckle from Hidan. He lifted his head back up and pressed himself against his desperate partner, pinning his hands temporarily between their crotches.

"Calm down, we have all the time in the world."

"I want you now."

"Hmm. That makes you *my* slave now, doesn't it?"

"Shut up and take your fucking pants off." He growled, forcing himself up and the grinning idiot on top of him back. Mercifully he got the button undone and the zipper down, immediately yanking the material down and exposing Hidan's member. He wrapped a hand around it and looked up at the lusty noise that sounded. Hidan had let his head fall back, and the single flickering torch on the wall cast an angelically evil glow on his demonized skin.

Oh *Jashin*, you beautifully cruel and gracious son of a bitch.

He pressed his head to the zealot's defined abs, absently stroking the rock-hard appendage. Calloused hands slid up his arm and over his shoulder, coming to rest on the crook of his neck. He shivered at the touch.

How could he keep something so wonderful from happening for so long? The world could be an entirely new place if Jashin had let the two of them run wild together. He would have people /begging/ to be sacrificed, people praying to the slaughter God just to let them experience the unholy bliss that Shikamaru was feeling right now.

Why prevent it for so long? Why let Shikamaru be reborn, waiting for twenty-so years for him to convert instead of sparing the already devoted Shikamaru from back then?

The kind of things they could have done, the kind of lives they could have lead, the pain they could have been spared...

He closed his eyes, pushing the thought away. *Don't get yourself depressed. If you cry on him again he'll never let it go.*

Steeling himself with a deep breath, he pulled back for a moment before curling himself further, taking Hidan into his mouth.

"Ooh fuck.." He heard, trying not to smile lest he choke himself. Fingers tangled into his hair and pushed him further, while the ebony hips rocked into it. He breathed in deep through his nose, damn, he didn't remember it feeling this big last time.

*Don't embarrass yourself by gagging you pansy.*

He clenched his eyes shut, focusing on the thought, the priest was doing all the work for him anyway...

The thrusts grew harder, shoving it deeper and deeper while Hidan moaned lowly above him.

Ten seconds of this had his own blood-laced drool leaking from the corners of his mouth. Twenty seconds had him on the verge of throwing up while the blunt head of Hidan's cock slammed into the back of his throat.

His stomache rolled, and just before he was about to embarrass himself his head was yanked backward, and he was pushed to the ground again as he gasped for air.

His jeans were nearly ripped off while the demon hungrily licked his lips.

"I'm gonna fucking destroy you..." He growled, somehow managing to gracefully maneuver his own pants off.

Shikamaru inhaled sharply at the remark, and entire new wave of arousal and victory sweeping over him. He had Hidan so horny he was almost getting pissed.

Leaning over him, Hidan drug his tounge from the very base of Shikamaru's standing length up his stomach, chest, throat, and chin. With a deep moan the younger grapped and yanked on silver tresses, pulling him into a deep kiss and scratching as hard as he could down the skeletal chest. Blood smeared from the fresh wounds as he slid his hand back up, wincing at the slight chafing of Hidan's shaft rubbing between his cheeks.

Mm, never in a millions years would he have thought the prospect of being unprepared would turn him on. It was practically a garuntee with the sadist, and he would know, seeing as this wss the third time this scenario had happened, and they'd both gotten over any false pretense of modesty.

Hidan's lips moved down the side of his face, a sharp bite to his ear had Shikamaru hissing in a breath and craning his neck while the zealots mouth closed around the vampire bite, sucking viciously. Shifting his weight over the Nara, he balanced himself on one arm while the other roamed over perfectly unmarred skin, thanks to the speedy healing he'd passed to the novice Jashinist.

Lean thighs raised themselves and squeezed Hidan's rocking hips, begging for his hand to go just a little lower. Shikamaru could hardly stand the tease of the murderous hands ghosting over him, coming so close to that erect organ but then slipping away.

Of course the bastard was a tease... Why the fuck wouldn't he be?

Finally it was gripped tightly, receiving something between a moan and yelp from bloodstained lips. Hidan smirked at him, leaning forward as if about to give another kiss, but stopping short, only

running the devilishly pink tongue in a circle around the crimson smear.

"Oh my..J-jashin..." He studded, receiving a yank down below. This was ridiculous, he wouldn't be able to stand much more before he just attacked the fucking psycho and fucked the hell out of him.

And maybe that's what he wanted...?

He licked his own lips, having made up his mind to get himself on top just before sharp teeth sunk into his inner thigh.

This one actually received an ecstatic shout from the younger, all planning abandoned for the moment as that devious, vulgar mouth drank in the running blood and ran his tongue up, somehow managing to smirk up at Shikamaru with his tongue out and not look like anything other than a fucking sex god.

The pink muscle flexed, pressing against his leaking tip, and Shikamaru lost control of his muscles at the ripple of pleasure. His eyes rolled and closed in time with a long groan, and his head fell back onto his propped shoulders.

Oh holy shit, he was putting it in his mouth. Oh fuck, Oh Jashin he wouldn't be able to take it...

He had to look, oh FUCK that felt so good, He absolutely had to see Hidan with his dick in his mouth.

He cracked an eye open, immediately assaulted with the most beautifully dirty fucking image he'd ever eyes bored into him, watching him watch, amused by it, aroused by it.

Oh dear sweet baby Jashin, He lied, he couldn't keep looking or he'd explode right there and then.

"Hidan.."

"Mmmm?"



"Lay down."

With a sickley sweet popping sound, Hidan tilted back, grinning widely and running his tongue up the side of his mouth. "Ahh riding bitch now Pineapple head?"

Growling, Shikamaru shot forward, twisting his body and pushing a little chakra into his arms so he had the strength to actually grab Hidan by the shoulders, turn him, and slam him onto the ground, immediatley climbing on top.

Hidan gave a lusty half-growl-half-laugh, grabbing the Nara by the ass and forcing their mouths together again, kissing hungrily through a smile at the needy little squeal the new immortal made when he slapped both cheeks so hard his fingers went momentarily numb.

His hands slid to the blood still leaking from the man's thigh, smearing it down onto his throbbing erection.

Shikamaru broke away finally, leaning forward until his chest hovered over Hidan's face, sucking in another quick breath when a tongue flicked over his nipple again while the zealot positioned himself, feeling the foreboding pressure against his hole. He closed his eyes tightly, it wouldn't even hurt this time, he knew. The still activated ritual would ensure nothing but pleasure.

His heart nearly beating out his ribcage, he lowered himself, eyes snapping open wide at the explosion of... God he couldn't even describe it! Double ritual mode sex was quite literally mind blowing, reflections upon reflections of each other feeling this soul-crushing ecstasy... Dear fucking Jashin it was almost too much. He couldn't talk, he couldn't even make noise, and there was no way in hell his body would stop reeling from the bliss long enough to listen to any command he gave it.

"Oohh fuuuck you better start moving..." Hidan groaned, grabbing Shikamaru by the waist and forcing him to do just that. The younger was doing everything he could not to cry out, focusing on his

breathing, fighting's Hidan's rough shoving as much as he could. It had to last, he had to make it last because as soon as it was over his very soul would pour out of him, nothing that felt this good could possibly be survivable.

"Oh GOD slow down!" He all but shouted, getting nothing in response but a hard buck beneath him, making him moan like the woman Hidan kept accusing him of being.

The immortal below him suddenly sat up, propping himself on one locked arm and using the other to keep manipulating Shika's ass. The continuous throaty grunts coming from him only made the younger more excited, knowing what he was doing to the man.

*Suck on that Kakuzu. You dick.*

Gritting his teeth, he rocked faster, rewarded by a hand suddenly wrapping itself around his neglected appendage.

"Oh fuckdamn!" He cried, far too consumed in the moment to even think about how hilariously stupid he must've sounded.

Hidan did growl out a small laugh, but nothing more. "Jashin fucking Hell Pineapple head, it's like you're a virgin again."

"Stop talking." He breathed back. Really, the zealot couldn't shut his mouth *ever*, could he?

Hidan's lips pulled back over animalistic teeth, not so much in a sneer or grimace as a 'I'm-about-to-lose-it' expression. In one motion that was somehow far more graceful than it should have been, he tore his propped arm from under himself and grabbed a chunk of Shikamaru's hair, pulling him into a kiss and taking him down along with him as his back flattened onto the ground again.

A deep groaning snarl ripped up his throat, and Shikamaru's eyes clenched shut as his own body stiffened against their mutual release. Stars exploded behind closed lids, everything lurched and swung,

like he was on a rollercoaster while drunk out of his mind, and he pressed himself harder onto the albino, clutching at his chest with bloodied nails as everything flipped and whirled around him.

Holy Jashin in fucking heaven above, he was literally going to die from pleasure. Every time he thought the feeling was fading it reflected back again from Hidan, and endless circle of agonizing perfection. The man beneath him groaned, expressing the same feeling, and Shikamaru distantly realized that Hidan was holding him so tightly that he couldn't breathe.

He pushed away half a millimeter, enough to draw a breath in before collapsing back to his original position, fully exhausted from just the miniscule movement.

Oh goddamn, that was so good it bordered on terrifying... He made a mental note not to go quite so crazy next time, smiling at the consolation that there *would* be a next time, even if he had to tie Hidan up and rape him..

Oh.. shit. He pushed the image from his head. This was not anything close to a good time to think of such things.

"Hidan.." He slurred out on the heaving chest, getting a delayed grunt in response.

"If you fucking leave again... I'll kill us both."

He had honestly meant it kind of jokingly at first, but as the silence drug on between them, broken only by their heavy breathing, he realized how much he actually meant that. He wouldn't tolerate losing Hidan. Not after everything he'd been through, not only in this life, but the previous one as well. He deserved Hidan, the man was rightfully his. What the hell had that fucking idiot Kakuzu ever sacrificed aside from stupid money?

He didn't care if he had to take on the entire world, he had the power of Jashin, he had the motivation of that four-letter L word, and he

had more anger stored up inside him than was humanly possibly to fuel him, should he need it.

"I won't..." Hidan replied in a mumble so low, Shikamaru wouldn't have heard it if his ear wasn't pressed into the man's throat. And he was suddenly rolled to the side, blinking as the ritual ended and their skin faded to its original color in perfect synch.

Hidan sat up and arched his upper body until a series of cracks echoed across the chamber.

Shikamaru scrambled up to his hands and knees, tackling the man over to the side and locking their lips together when he opened his mouth to complain. It was nothing more than a suspended peck, but somehow just as meaningful as the entire session they'd just had.

Shikamaru finally pulled away, laughing gently at the glazed look in the violet eyes he'd grown so reasonably fond of. "I... love you..." He all but whispered, thinking it sounded so terribly, *beautifully* wrong that it gave him a rush. There it was, he finally said it out loud. Not even in private had he ever even considered trying the phrase out, feeling how adorably awkward the words tumbled from him.

Hidan's eyes snapped back to attention, again he stared without a single clue as to what thoughts were going on in that insane mind of his. Seconds stretched to minutes, and Shikamaru stared right back, he was beyond humility. He didn't care whether the zealot said it back or not, he was so damned proud of himself for admitting it in the first place that nothing could ruin the moment.

"That's not fair..." Hidan whispered, making the novice leaning over his chest raise a brow.

"What's not fair?"

"Saying that to me."

"... Why?" He said, straightening up and trying to cut off the small trickle of irritation before he ruined the moment himself.

"Last time you said that to me you died."

surprised both himself and the albino by laughing. "What are you talking about? That makes it *more* fair. I can't die now, remember?"

Hidan considered this, and seemed to be struggling to relax as he sat himself up too. "Hm. Fucking making shit awkward. You never used to do that, you know."

Shikamaru smiled and chuckled softly again before standing and moving over to slip back into his clothes, failing miserably to wipe his own sticky mess of his stomach. "It's only weird if you make it."

Fuck, he'd have to go break into the athletic club tonight and shower... Maybe he'd take Hidan with him.

He continued smiling to himself, amused that his mind had skipped over the showering scenario and jumped straight into thinking up all the different forms of havoc they could wreak on the building. It seemed his Jashinist side had broken from its cocoon finally.

"Hey."

"What?"

He'd just finished putting his hair back in its usual ponytail when arms wrapped around him from behind and a cheek pressed against his ear, lips brushing softly on the point where his neck became shoulder. He stiffened only briefly before forcing the tension from himself. It was *exactly* the same as one of the dreams he'd had all those six months ago. The one where Jashin spoke in his bodiless voice. "*This is my gift to you..*" He had said...

"I... I do too.." Hidan breathed.

"You do what?" He whispered back, pulse racing once again. He knew what he meant, he was far from an idiot. But their relationship was based off the constant teasing they did to each other, and not only would making the mostly shameless priest say the words out loud make him horribly uncomfortable, but he also just wanted him to say it. If he'd say it just this once... he'd never ask again...

"You know what I mean.."

"I don't think I do."

"Don't push me Pineapple head.. it's.. hard."

"Then just pretend I didn't die."

The body pressed against him shifted nervously, sighed deeply, and lifted his mouth to where Shikamaru could feel hot breath inside his ear canal. And he whispered so quietly that it would sound like nothing more than a breath to anyone who wasn't as close as the Nara was himself.

" *I love you.*"

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A/N-

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My first Lemon. Be nice to me okay? I did this one myself, and it was really, really, really, REALLY hard. I give Fluff and every other person out there who writes them on a daily basis HUUUGE props because GODDAMN it was mentally exhausting. Pretty sure my face is stained in a permanent blush.

Anyway, YAAAAYYY! for fluffy ooc Hidan! Don't you wanna eat him up? I do. Lol, it's so terrible, I made *myself* fangirl scream when Shika said it, then I was trying not to die of happiness when I made Hidan say it back. T-T I'm too involved in my own stories.. even I don't know what they're gonna do until they do it.. Damn. But

anyway, if anyone thinks maybe it's a little *too* out of character for him to say it, you have to consider everything. He just regained a giant chunk of his memory, his very first memories, all with Shikamaru in them. His lover had told him he loved him RIGHT before Hidan was forced to kill him, hearing Shikamaru say it is literally like a second chance for him. Even if he is a total psycho, he's not gonna pass that up.

ANYWAY! So Hidan's past is finally compleatly revealed, as well as Shika's past before his past. xD If that makes sense. Lol. It's alllllll starting to come together. And now everyone can stop secretly hating me for not having them get together in the prequel. . Kakuzu is gonna be pissed, by the way. But I better shut up before I give out spoilers. xD

Anyway, HERE IT ISSS! Chapter two! Chappie three may or may not take a long time. I'm not making any promises because for some reason my life seems to have suddenly gotten rediculously busy... OH! And I make a little sketch of Shika in his ritual skin, As soon as I find a decent art program that won't cost me my soul to download I'll pop it up on my deviantart page. Info on that is on my profile.

Anyway, I'll stop blabbing. So.

THANKSFORREADINGILOVEYOUALLFORGIVETHETYPOSANDM  
OSTI MPORTANTLY,

Leave me a review. Or I swear to Jashin, No more fluff.

Don't make me do it.

Please.

# The trouble with faith

Come What May

*I love you.*

Jashin he could start crying. He really could, and Hidan could tease him until his throat bled. He honestly wouldn't even care.

Beautiful, indescribably beautiful. Those three words were more breathtaking gorgeous than anything this earth had to offer visually. Words of compassion and care coming from the mouth of someone so accustomed to pain and misery that they had become the embodiment of it.

*I love you.*

His heart was going to explode into dust from the magnitude of the statement. Some people threw the words around carelessly, ruining any kind of special meaning they may hold, turning them more into poison than anything else. But Hidan didn't. Hidan with his child-like sincerity in such matters would never say such a dangerous word to anyone he did not truly care for. And Shikamaru himself would not only never say it, but wouldn't tolerate hearing it until he knew for a fact that it were 100% true.

*I love you.*

Shikamaru ran his hands through his hair, yawning as he finger-combed it up into a ponytail. He stared boredly into the dirty mirror, going through a mental list of to-do's, constantly distracted by the repeating phrase Hidan whispered to him in his thoughts, like his mind were a tape player.

Letting his arms fall to his sides, he sighed, watching his reflection do the same with the small crook at the edge of his mouth.



Life was good. Life was better than good. It was perfect. He quite literally could not ask for more, and he couldn't possibly sacrifice enough souls to repay Jashin for this wonderfully convoluted scheme he'd worked up. He honestly had no other idea how to thank him aside from just saying 'Thank you.'

He blinked then, small smile disappearing as he squinted and leaned in closer to the mirror with one brow raised in question. He turned his face side to side, pulling his eyelids open for a second and then rubbing them shut, peeking at it again afterward.

Hmm... He was pretty sure he never had that weird little ring around his pupil. Like his already-small-to-begin-with iris's had gone from black to a burnt charcoal... not really a huge difference, but curious all the same.

His nose crinkled briefly at his reflection, who made the same face back, before he turned and began slipping into clean clothes.

*I love you.*

Again his lips curled involuntarily. He didn't think he could ever get tired of hearing it, even though it would most likely never be said aloud again. Especially since Hidan had taken off the same night.

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"You really can't even wait till morning?" Shikamaru had said, admittedly whining just a little.

"The sooner I get it over with the better. It's not gonna be easy pineapple head.. he's going to fucking kill me." Hidan replied, scrubbing blood from his chest on the edge of Shikamaru's cot. They'd skipped the showering idea and instead retreated to the Nara's small secret base. The zealot was dead-set on leaving immediatly, but for obvious reasons thought it best to clean up first. Scratch and bite marks couldn't really be explained away as remnants of their battle.

"Maybe I should tag along then. He's scared of me."

"He ain't fucking scared of a twig like you."

"He knows I could kill the shit out of him if I really wanted too."

"Doesn't mean he's *scared* of you."

"Well. I'll have to work on that then."

Hidan snorted at this and stood, handing the damp, blood-stained rag to the younger Jashinist. "Get your cat-scratches off my back will'ya?"

Shikamaru took it, staring quizzically down at it before looking back up only to see a mop of silver hair. "Cat scratches?" He questioned to Hidan's back, scrubbing at the nearly healed claw marks.

"Yeah, cause you're like a kitten."

"How the fuck am I like a cat?"

"Because, moron. You just are."

His eyes narrowed as he finished wiping the dried blood away. He supposed he could take that as some kind of weird compliment from the psycho. He could kind of understand it, because kittens were harmless and innocent on first glance. Piss them off and they pull out their claws... but give them affection and they return it twofold. Independently dependent beings, they don't /need/ you, but prefer the company.

Huh... weird. He'd never been compared to a cat before. Honestly he didn't think it was accurate, but it was cute for the cult member to mention it. He settled with smiling and shaking his head, until he remembered what was going on. Scatterbrained much?

"How long is this going to take?"

Hidan gave an irritated sigh and whirled, slapping the rag from his lovers hand and glaring. "I'm going to have to break you of that shit if this is ever gonna work out."

Shikamaru grimaced. First he called him a cat and now he was 'breaking' him like a freeking horse?

"I'm not an animal. And what are you talking about?"

Hidan moved past him to grab the bloodied, torn cloak he'd first showed up in, shrugging into it. "Asking about time. How long for this? How long for that? Be here on this day within this hour. Rushing me, I can tolerate that shit from Kuzu usually but you... you're gonna fucking drive us both insane." He stepped forward to the slightly shorter man, putting his hands on his shoulders and leaning forward, violet eyes flicking back and forth between the Nara's as if interested in something about them. Finally he grunted in something between confusion and amusement and stepped around him.

"Time doesn't mean shit anymore Pineapple head. Stop clinging to it like some mortal. Let yourself be free huh?" With that he gave the spikey-haired man a seductive smile, announced that he would be back shortly, and was sucked into a tarry puddle that faded in and out of existence on cue. Shikamaru had sat staring at the spot where he dissapeared. *Kuzu*, ugh... That bastard didn't deserve such a cute nickname. How had that old fuck ended up with *Kuzu* while Shikamaru ran around as Pineapple head?

He sighed heavily, and went about gathering his personal things so he could go find somewhere to clean himself up.

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That had been two days ago. Still the novice immortal was baffled by his lovers last statement. Hidan had said things similar to that more times than he could count, and yet for some reason this time it actually sank in. Just saying it was easy enough, but actually doing it? That was another story. Humans were mentally trained to attune themselves to time, weaved their entire existence around a clock

and it's numbers. When to get up, when to eat, when to go to work, when to go home, everything was about time and lengths of it. How the fucking hell could Hidan expect him to just spontaneously stop keeping track of it?

And besides, so what if they had all the time in the world? Jashin knows that Hidan had the patience of a toddler, who the hell was he to preach such things to him?

"Psycho.." He laughed, yanking on his boots and then clipping his belt and accompanying little sash pouch around his waist. After the last small effort of slipping the glove with the summoning seal for his scythe, seeing as tattoos wouldn't last on his superhuman selfhealing body, he too melted down into a puddle of shadow ooze. Not having an actual open entrance on his little headquarters made it much more secure, as well as gave him an excuse to use his fast-travel Justsu. It was hell on his chakra reserves, but damn was it fun.

---

Well.. he had time to kill. Jashin didn't need another soul for a few weeks, he had plenty of cash stocked up.

Hmm... he supposed he might as well start researching for his next sacrifice. He still had two backup targets that were supposedly keeping residence in this place that would suffice... but the longer he stayed here, the worse chance there was for the police to catch on to what he was doing. His law firm hadn't been very happy when he spontaneously walked into the office and told his supervisor to go fuck himself. And then by some miracle they got off their ignorant asses and actually found out about all the insane shit that had happened those last few weeks of his previous life, and witnesses could put him at the scene of ALL of it, along with Itachi Uchiha, the man who'd murdered his family some years ago, Kisame Hoshigaki, who'd apparently been part of some *other* secret organization and killed them all after finding out they'd deceived him before joining Akatsuki, and a man who miraculously seemed to have absolutely nothing other than multiple witness reports to prove he existed.

So yeah... he sort of had a little outstanding warrant. As far as law enforcement was concerned he was a part of Akatsuki, and most of the country still believed that because the little club was made of extremely powerful ex-criminals, they were bad news, even though they were quite literally the opposite.

Idiots.

However.. Hidan and himself were another story. Someone finds out about his situation, that he's murdering people to satiate a God most average people had never heard of... they'd come after him with everything they had.

Shikamaru had basically become an organized serial killer, no matter what direction you came at the situation from.

This train of thought of course put a damper on his mood, and also reminded him why he no longer had the luxury of being lazy. Nope, He had his sacrifice from this area, and he needed to move on.

Of course, he had to wait for Hidan's return, which left him back at square one, wondering how to pass the time.

So... time... passing it... Damn. Why couldn't he think of anything? How did Hidan do this?

What disturbed him the most was the fact that he was actually upset that he *had* free time. Nearly three years ago he would have killed to have a second or so to himself to just sit and do nothing... What the hell had happened to him?

Hah... dumb question.

Hidan had happened.

His eyes flicked up from the sidewalk as he walked, releasing a sigh.

*Well Jashin? Got any ideas?*

A small tug at his awareness had him instantly smiling. The slaughter God was being unusually kind lately, it seemed. He knew that feeling, it happened normally whenever Hidan needed him. Like when he'd been attacked by Neji...

Wait a second.

Oh damn. Hidan needed him?!

He stopped, blinking hard and standing still as a statue, waiting for another pull.

5 long seconds went by, and his brows furrowed in concern. He turned, scanning the streets and the people behind him as if the answer lie there.

"Excuse me..."

He turned to the meek feminine voice, finding a dark haired woman with green eyes suddenly in front of him. She was standing uncomfortably close, and he took a step back, clearing his throat to cover the awkwardness of her sudden appearance.

"Uhm. Can you help me please?" She said, large emerald eyes looking as if she were about to burst into tears.

"Uh..." He said, too busy trying to figure out this situation to feel like an idiot for such a lame response.

"I need someone's help, you look like a jutsu user. These men took my purse, it has my entire life in it, cellphone, passport, license, credit cards. They ran off down that alley but it's a dead end."

He felt a single brow raise on his otherwise blank face. Everything about this woman screamed 'this is abnormal'. For one, she was way too calm to have just been mugged. And two, unless you're a jutsu user yourself and can sense chakra, there's no physical way to tell the difference between average people and those capable of jutsu.

"Sorry lady.." He said, moving to step around her. He didn't feel guilty about turning down someones request for help. He wasn't the same kind-heart person anymore, after all. He killed people. "That's the police's job."

A delicate hand shot out and slapped around his wrist, tugging slightly. "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!" She cried, making him turn back and regard her as if she'd just revealed herself to have a horribly deadly, contagious disease.

"I need *you*." She said must softer, staring hard at him before she silently lifted her free hand up and tucked her loose hair behind her ear. His eyes followed the action, to his own irritation. And for half a second there he wanted to burst into laughter at the immediate conclusion he came to that this girl was trying to get with him. The poor thing, did she really just stand here on the streets all day waiting for attractive men to walk by?

But then he saw it, a tattoo just under her earlobe, perfectly hidden unless you looked at her from this exact angle and she brushed her hair back in that exact way to draw your attention to it.

A circle with an upside down triangle.

This woman was a Jashinist.

Huh...

His own hand absently reached up to clutch at his rosary, suddenly self-conscious of wearing it out there for the whole world to see. Jashinism was a *secret*, this woman must think him an idiot for.. Bah.. no wait. Who cares? Hidan did the same, going even so far as to shout Jashin's name and randomly attack people in broad daylight with no regard for any secrecy. He and Shikamaru's *job* was to spread the word, that wouldn't work very well if they kept their identities hidden.

The woman gave him a venomous smile at his action. "Please, I need your aid... sir."

He swallowed hard, what was the protocol for dealing with other Jashinists that approached you on the street? He only knew one, and that of course was the psycho. Honestly it was kind of surreal to be speaking with this woman right now. First of all, she was a girl. Why this was so strange, he wasn't entirely sure. Girls just didn't strike him as the 'death, slaughter, destruction' type, you could say. Though he'd met plenty of terrifyingly violent women in his lifetime... maybe it was kind of sexist for him to have such a thought.. and why was he thinking about this anyway?

Damn, he couldn't keep his mind on track today...

"Erm.. well. I guess. Which alley is it?"

"Just this one right over here." Without letting go of his wrist she spun. dragging him with an unexpected sturdiness a few yards in the direction he'd been walking and then turning quickly through a small gate of a wooded fence that he assumed was supposed to keep the alley closed off to passersby. Of course thugs would use it for their own good though, idiots.

"It's just down here..." She muttered, an ominous tone taking over her voice.

His mind suddenly sparked into realization. This alley was empty as fuck. And it wasn't a dead end at all like she'd said. In fact it was a really big alley, like a junction that split out on all four sides of the block. There was a black van parked in the center.

Son of a bitch. What the fuck was going on here?

Stopped then, a small amount of anger trickling into his veins as he dug his heels into the dirt and wrenched his hand away from hers, glowering when she looked back.



"What the fuck are you up to here bitch?" He said, surprised by the smile that overcame her.

"Listen to you... you even talk like him. Amazing.." She held her hand up, curling her fingers in a 'Come here' gesture over her shoulder, and then behind her the door slid open to the van and three more women stepped out, each of them looking manlier as well as tougher than the last.

He squinted first at the dark haired girl in front of him, and then the other three making their way over.

Seriously... what the *fuck* was going on?

In a flash the green-eyed woman slipped behind him, grapping both his wrists and yanking them backward and up and closing cold metal around each snarled and tried to whirl around but the woman suddenly had his ankles bound as well. She was a quick little shit.

He lost his balance, falling to the ground in humiliation while the other three finally reached him, laughing above him while he bared his teeth.

"He's about as smart as him too. That was too easy..." One of them said in a disgustingly masculine voice.

"You stupid fucking whore.." He growled, "You really shouldn't piss me off."

"Listen to that! They could be twins huh?"

Anger flooded and he tried to push chakra into his hands, only to feel absolutly empty of it, as if it had simply evaporated into the air. he struggled in confusion for only a second before it dawned on him that it must be chakra-prohibiting metal the tied him with.

One of the woman knelt down, she had fiery hazel eyes and matching hair. She reached out, looking at him with a feigned

fondness and stroked his cheek. "It's okay honey.. We know you don't like girls. We'll make it quick. Promise. Just don't struggle."

His eyes widened and face contorted in disgust before another wave of rage exploded in him. They wanted to *screw him*? WHAT THE FUCKING HELL WAS GOING ON HERE!?

"I'm going to kill all of you." He said, surprised as how calm his voice came out, seeing as his insides felt like they were melting from the Power Jashin was pumping into him. These bimbo's were seriously fuking stupid if they were indeed Jashinists, and thought cutting off his chakra would make him suddenly defenseless.

"Huuush baby. We're not going to hurt you okay?" The kneeling bitch replied. "You sure are pretty though, isn't he girls? You don't look like a bastard, really.. but looks can be deceiving..."

That was it, smirking up at her, he flexed his arms, resisting the urge to burst out laughing when the metal snapped and clattered to the ground as if he just broken a toothpick. The kneeling womans face went slack, and she didn't even have time to gasp before he ripped the pike from his belt, extended it, curled his feet under him, and shoved it through her with as much power as he could muster. Pushing her up off the ground with the force, and yanking the weapon free from her ribcage as she soared briefly through the air, colliding with the alley wall and letting out a small choking noise before she collapsed to the dirt.

The other three woman stepped back, mouths hanging open in surprise.

"You stupid bitch..." He chuckled, studying the blood dripping from the pike. She was dead already, licking it off wouldn't do any good. But damn was he tempted anyway...

*Calm down Shika. This isn't a sacrifice. No reason to try to enjoy it.*

But he did. He did enjoy it. Staring at the hunk of bleeding flesh and bones on the ground had adrenaline rushing his veins. His smile was slowly stretching wider and wider as he resisted the insane laughter itching at the back of his throat.

He twisted his foot then, snapping the metal handcuffs as easily as the last pair, and almost moaned as his chakra flowed back into him. More power, more means to destroy these girls. These stupid fucking girls.

" *Sacrificing a Jashinist is worth ten normal souls!*" Hidan's voice suddenly rang in his head, and his brows flicked up in interest. Did they know this? These morons who'd tried to capture him and seduce him? Did they have any clue how much they'd just fucked themselves.

Apparently not, he reasoned, as the smallest woman, the one who'd approached him in the first place darted forward, snarling out nearly incoherent death threats.

"You all must be even newer than me if you think you're going to be able to capture me with *that* sorry excuse for a plan.." he muttered, sidestepping her and slashing the blade straight across her throat. Blood spurted and she gagged, crashing to the ground and convulsing with her hands clentched around a bleeding throat.

"And just charging me with no weapon or jutsu to back you up? You must be braindead, seriously. Do you even know who I am?" He said down to the dyeing girl. Wondering briefly if it was even worth sacrificing any of these idiots. Jashin would probably spit them back out and bitch-slap him for sending him something so useless. Every other soul had been so tarnished with murder and other fucked up crimes of cruelty and sadism... While it's true that he had no idea who these ladies were, he seriously doubted they were anything other than novices, even more green than he was himself.

He looked back up to the other girls in interest. They only glared at him, and he couldn't help but laugh and twirl his pike in his hand.

Ignorance is bliss... until you get yourself sacrificed to a demon god.

"So are you two followers of the Great and mighty Jashin too?" He called out, taking a step forward. They each took respective steps away from him, only fueling his disturbing glee at the situation.

"If so, I think I need to kill you. It's shameful for his disciples to be so useless. He has no need to troublesome gnats like you."

"Don't come any closer!" One of them boldly ordered, making him burst into laughter when she pulled out an old-school katana and lit it up with a chakra flame so bright red that he would swear it was pink.

"What're you going to do? *Kill me?* " He said between gasps. "I'd like to see you try, I really would."

Shadows came up from the ground under the woman, and she shrieked briefly before a dark tentacle yanked the weapon from her hand and constricted her body so tightly that her eyes nearly bulged from her head. The other girl suddenly burst into tears and tried to make a run for it.

Shikamaru sighed, rolling his eyes and sending a chakra pulse into his gloved hand. The new and improved triple-bladed scythe phased into existence with a dark purple throb. He swung, forcing another small lump of chakra to release it into extension mode. It slipped almost like a snake in the air over the van and on back down the alley, catching on something that the Nara reasoned was the woman after a short cry and gargling noise. He yanked it back, staring the still restrained woman in the eyes as her friends limp body came back, slamming into the ground, impaled with the scythe diagonally across her torso.

She squirmed, shaking her head and staring down at the corpse in a silent scream.

Shikamaru smirked, putting his foot on the body to hold it down while he pulled out his weapon, and letting it poof away back to it's hiding

place before stepping forward. He regarded the girl with boredom and irritation as the adrenaline and anger leaked from him, taking with it the thrill of Jashin's power. This was no longer fun, especially since the realization that he'd just killed three people, three *girls*, without even bothering to sacrifice them. If he hadn't been a heartless killer before, he certainly was now.

*They were threatening your life...* A voice of reason whispered in his head.

They did no such thing, he snapped back at it. They implied trying to force sex on him, but said absolutely nothing about harming him.

"Now, what I want to know.." He said slowly to the girl, bringing his face as close as he could to hers, mocking her with a sensual smile, playing on their previous intentions. "Is what you and your dead friends were up to?"

He motioned for the shadow to uncover her mouth, but it remained stubbornly shut. He had to give her some credit, she must indeed be a Jashinist if she could watch all her friends be slaughtered and still keep herself in a coherent enough state of mind not to blab even though the look in her eyes said she desperately wanted to.

Her eyes flicked only for a thousandth of a millisecond to something behind him, and his eyes went wide before pain exploded into his chest. He grunted as whatever weapon was pulled back out of his back, and twisted behind him, eyes first alighting on a pink tongue lapping up the blood from a telescopic pike, and then slowly moving up.

Violet eyes, silver hair, amused grin with Shikamaru's blood smeared slightly on the corner of his mouths... It sure as fuck looked like Hidan, his mind said.

"Mm, good stuff." He said, and Shikamaru again exploded so violently into laughter that the silver-haired man in front of him quickly jumped back into a defensive position. Still laughing, Shikamaru

stuck out two fingers toward the man, and in no more than a heartbeat, three shadow minions fell from the shadows on the wall and rushed him, piercing his body a total of 6 times with their twig-like arms that turned into sharpened little stakes at the ends.

He lifted his other hand up and then closed it into a fist, and the girl behind him shrieked briefly as her restraints squeezed her, crushing her bones, making her eyelids pop from the sockets, blood squirted almost comically from every hole it could find.

The Hidan imposter in front of him stared, wide eyed, with the crimson running from each wound. He was held easily in place by the trio of shadow monsters, his mouth bobbed open and closed, wanting to ask questions but obviously too stricken with the pain to be able to.

"First of all, whoever you are. That fucking hurt." Shikamaru said, retracting his fist and letting it spring forward again without the aid of any chakra to smash into the side of the not-Hidan's face.

"Second, don't ever, EVER fucking insult me by pretending to be him. You're some whole other kind of stupid than your little team of girlscouts here if you really think I'd fall for that." Again he rammed a fist into the man, who groaned and spat out a wad of blood.

He smiled to himself when the disguised flickered out and the man morphed before his eyes into a middle-aged, brunette man, with disgusting shit-colored eyes that stared at him, glazed from being so near death.

"Tell me who you are, and what the fuck you were planning on doing with me, before I get *really* pissed."

The man stared at him, eyes growing more and more dull by the second. He muttered something, but damn it all if Shikamaru heard nothing but an incomprehensible gargle of sounds. He grabbed the man by the shirt and shook him.

"HEY! WAKE THE FUCK UP AND TELL ME!?" He gritted his teeth as the mans head just fell limply forward. DAMN! Damndamndamn, he'd overdone it.

He didn't like this, he could deal with the fact that maybe some Jashinist ladies had heard of him or something and wanted him, but someone disguising themselves as Hidan with Jutsu and pretending to try to sacrifice him? That was disturbing. They obviously knew that he and Hidan had some sort of relationship, though apparently they didn't know just *how close* they were, thinking they could fool him with some inane disguise like that. And now that he thought about it, apparently the ladies had even *met* Hidan at one time or another...

*Listen to you... you even talk like him.*

*He's about as smart as him too...*

And now he remembered that feeling he'd had before the woman distracted him with all this nonsense. Was Hidan having trouble with some fellow Jashinists as well? Were they trying to kidnap him too?

Dammit, what the fucking hell was going on here...

"Go ahead and clean up the mess..." He said distantly to his minions, still standing with their hands shoved into the mans flesh. After a series of sick sucking noises, they pulled themselves free, each taking off in different directions to dispose of the evidence. Shikamaru sighed as he watched them lurch away. Five bodies... Five FUCKING bodies he had to get rid of now. Dammit, he wasn't in the goddamned Mafia, he didn't know how to dispose of bodies, and his little minions could only suck up small debree and blood. Unless he went to the trouble of cutting them all into little pieces, (which, no fucking thanks, he wasn't going to do) he had to figure out what to do with them now.

He looked around, making a face when he came to the girl who'd been right next to the van behind him that he'd crushed to death. His

chest clenched up and he looked away quickly.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. How could he do something so gruesome?

That... that was just disgusting. *Oh Jashin, I'm gonna be sick.* How.. *how?* How could he so easily give a command to his shadow jutsu to do something like that and not even think twice about it?

Fuck, fucking hell... he was having trouble breathing now. His stomach churned at the image, burned into the back of his eyelids.

"Load it into the van.." He commanded the tentacles still restraining the body, leaning over and staring at the ground, focusing on his breathing and not everything that had just occurred.

He hadn't even felt possessed that time. That was him, that was all him. Or was it? Maybe Jashin was just getting better at controlling him... more subtle. He'd really felt like he was making the decisions. He hadn't even really had any inner arguments with himself like usual. There hadn't been any little voice in his head telling him to stop, telling him to look at what he was doing.

Jashin fucking hell he'd just *slaughtered* five people!

There was blood everywhere. And he'd just let all this happen around him, *caused* it to happen, while laughing like a maniac. Interrogating them as if it was completely normal to kill someone.

*It is normal for a Jashinist.*

SHUT UP! Ugh. His own conscious was betraying him. He'd thought he could manage to sacrifice people, as long as he had himself somewhat convinced that he was doing a good thing. But now he wasn't so sure it hadn't affected him at all. He'd killed a total of six people before today. All out of necessity. It was something that had to be done for him to continue living, for Hidan to continue living.



But these guys, he didn't *have* to kill them. And yet at the time there had literally been no other solution in his mind. It hadn't even occurred to him *not* to kill them...

*Did it ever occur to you not to kill someone just because they piss you off?* His own voice floated into his head, as well as Hidan's baffled expression that resulted from the question. He'd said that to him the very first day Hidan had come back from the dead, when they were waiting on the elevator, right before Shika had had that mental meltdown due to the blood infection he'd gotten from his fight with the zombie man.

He'd warned those women not to piss him off... Just like Hidan had done numerous times to Neji and Shikamaru himself.

It didn't... it didn't occur to him at all. That's why he'd been so confused. It had seemed funny at the time, but it wasn't funny at all. It was like he didn't even have a choice in the matter. Someone pisses you off, you kill them, that just how it worked.

"Put... put them all in the van.." He ordered to his shadows, his throat tight with the sudden urge to vomit. Oh shit, how had such a wonderful day turned into this?

He had to get out of here.. he just needed to leave and go home and lay down and wait for Hidan to come back. He could explain things, he could calm him down, make him feel better.

Was he losing his mind? Is this how it started? Did Hidan go through this too?

His stomach rolled and he closed his eyes, trying to picture himself back in the sacrificial chamber as the contents of his stomach forced themselves back out into the open air. He ignored the disgusting sound like a bucket of water being poured and instead wrapped his arms around his stomach, pretending they were his crazy lovers.

*I love you.*

Yes.. Yes that was better...

He sucked in a breath, then another. No more vomit, good, good.

*I love you.*

It was okay. It was all worth it. Hidan loved him. Hidan chose him. Hidan would be coming back and they would live happily ever after for the rest of eternity. Nothing mattered as long as he had Hidan... right? He'd killed their master in a past life for him, and he could kill a few worthless Jashinists in this one. They wouldn't do anything but slander the demon God's name anyway.

*I love you .*

Yeahh.. yeah. Tch, what was he freaking out about? This was nothing. Hah, wait until he told Hidan. He'd probably get the biggest kick. Fucking idiots, trying to use his love against him. Ignorant bastards.

One last *thunk* finally drew his attention to the black van, and his eyes narrowed while he straightened his body. One of his minions struggled to push the door closed, the poor dear, he should really try to tinker with them, make them not so twiglike and weak. Like Hidan's, his little shadows had been able to not only wield a big heavy scythe, but to actually move quickly.

Hmm, that was for another time though, right now, he had to get rid of this disgusting mess. Luckily for him, the harbor wasn't that far away. Unluckily for him, it was the middle of the afternoon, still 3 more hours left before it even *started* to get dark. Steeling himself, he waved away his jutsu, not waiting for them to all fade from existence as he hopped into the driver's side. They had conveniently left the keys in the ignition, how nice of them.

He started it and pulled slowly from the alleyway.

*Jashin help me.* He prayed, this situation was just insane...

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Three hours. *Three fucking hours* of sitting here in this disgusting, festering, stinking van. This was stupid, this was so incredibly stupid. Fuck, there was no way he was going to tell Hidan about this. He'd never let him fucking live it down.

Dammit Hidan. Shikamaru had quickly gotten over his trauma and launched himself immediately into anger. That albino fuck. If he'd just let Shika go with him then this wouldn't have happened. Or If he just hadn't fucking left in the first place, that would have been perfect.

Yeah, this was his fault, dammit. Those people obviously knew him. They probably had some grudge against him, so they tried to get back at him by working through his newest little pineapple headed boyfriend. After all, they'd gone after Kakuzu, why wouldn't they go after Shikamaru.

Fucking Hell you psycho, you can't even remain in good graces among a bunch of cult members!

Jashin above, why the hell was he so enamored with him again? The idiot...

He silently steamed behind the wheel. He was at the harbor now, all he had to do was find the perfect spot to drive this hunk of garbage that he never fucking wanted to see again into the water, blow it up and destroy any evidence he might have looked over, and he'd be in the clear. Then he could retreat back to his cozy little headquarters and just fucking sleep until Hidan came back.

"Okay, remember what I showed you?" He said to the inky blob beside him. It jiggled in reply.

"Okay, just don't make it too big, or people are going to notice, wait until it hits the bottom and settles there before releasing the chakra okay?"

The blob jiggled again, and Shikamaru nodded, narrowing his eyes as the edge of the dock came closer and closer.

It was a technique he'd been working on, originally it had started out as him trying to be able to make his own smoke bombs with nothing but chakra. Unfortunately it was really difficult to turn shadows, the absence of light, into smoke, a chemical reaction. Of course you can imagine that his tinkering had gone a little bit wrong... meaning he had accidentally destroyed one of his hideouts. Thank Jashin for immortality, at least.

But through this he had, of course, figured out how to condense a mass amount of chakra into a small little ball the size of a marble, as long as you kept it still and unmoving, it pretty well turned itself into a solid object that could be carried around. Then all you had to do was crush the delicate outer skin and boom. Large-scale explosion.

Now that he thought about it, it was eerily convenient that he'd discovered this technique, even though at the time he'd thought it to be a complete failure. There was no way he could ever use such a jutsu. He was trying to operate below the law's nose, not trying to advertise himself to the whole world.

Flicking his eyes down to his foot, he summoned a small shadow tentacle to emerge from the floorboard and wrap itself around the gas pedal, holding it down. With one final look at the blob sitting in the passenger seat, cradling that little chakra marble inside a thick layer of cushioning, he opened the door and leaped out, curling himself into a roll before coming to a stop just in time to watch the red tail-lights disappear over the edge of the dock.

Alright, no time to dawdle. His chakra was almost completely depleted, and he needed to get the hell out of here. That meant no fast travel, that meant not even moderatley fast travel. That meant literally just sprinting away from the scene until he was a safe enough distance to walk casually back to his hideout and wait outside until he had enough chakra build up to teleport into the dwelling.

The splash was rediculously loud as the vehicle collided with the water, and jumpstarted him into scrambling to his feet and taking off. He smiled depite himself as he ran, okay okay... maybe this wasn't so bad. Maybe he'd been overreacting a little bit, it was actually kind of fun.

Damn, he wished Hidan were here. He was actually kind of proud of himself..

His boots seemed so loud as passed over the concrete. Fuck he was going so slow, he wasn't used to this. That damn chakra bomb took up more than his fucking fast-travel did. He could hardly spare enough to force down into his legs, letting him leap up so he could at least run over the tops of the buildings and not have to run down the street. Someone would probably get suspicious and stop him.

The muffled *boom* and the sound of water bursting up into the air had him laughing out loud with mischevious glee.

*Don't fuck with Shikamaru fucking Nara.*

You'd think people would learn by now... seriously.

So troublesome...

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A/N-

Uugh. Hi guys.

Short chapter.. sorry. I literally had to force this out. I don't know why I'm so unmotivated. Some seriously rediculous shit has kind of taken over my life. It's hard to focus on anything else. I haven't lost interest int he story, I promise, but it's just really hard to convince myself to sit down and work on it when I could go take a nap and escape reality instead.

Meh, so anyway, I drew a pikchuurrrr of how I imagine Shikamaru to look. Unfortunatly the quality is really crappy because I didn't want to dig out my scanner from my closet, so I just took a picture of it with my phone.. but, it's up on my Deviantart page. My name is the same on there as it is here, Wierdowithagun. So go check it out, cuz I worked really hard on it... at work... when I was supposed to be working. Lol. xD Don't judge me. But anyway, go look at him, he's smexy. :3

Also. I want fanart guys. And more reviews. Maybe that's why I'm so un-fucking-moitvated to write. I don't give a damn if all you can do is draw stickfigures. Make me something. Or my posting speed is going to seriously suffer.

So anyway. Looove you! And don't forget to do all the stuff I told you.  
e\_e

See ya next chap!

# Blacklisted

## Come What May

A/N-

*Wow. Not a single review on the last chapter. I'm upset. In fact, it was one of the things that made this one so hard to do. Luckily I'm a nice fucking person, even though I'm not. Because... well..*

*I've lost interest in this story. I don't know how. But I have. In fact I'm pretty sure I'm gonna be moving on to another fandom. Love Naruto, seriously. But it's getting old... So Here's chapter four, and I think this story might be discontinued. So enjoy, I tried to make it really, really long for you.*

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There's blood everywhere. Flying in all directions, squirting from bodies, running down his hands.

It's beautiful. Crimson shining liquid gold everywhere you look. He's so happy, so angry but happy. Slaughter is so beautiful, Oh Jashin he'd forgotten how good it felt not to hold back.

One corpse after another, they dropped like flies, these sorry excuses for Jashinists. They had no idea what they were doing, whoever inducted them should be sacrificed, they were all insults to his Lord.

How dare they degrade him with their rituals and prayers. They knew nothing of Jashin, these heathens. They said the words without meaning, performed the actions without faith. How could they ever hope to compete with him, Jashin's immortal son. His most devoted follower, beloved disciple. These heathens were nothing but a stain on his cloak of faith.

They would all die. Each and every one of them.

He was running, swinging right and grunts, surprised gargles, incoherent last words, they flooded him like a drug as he slaughtered one after the other. They came in swarms, current him with their useless weapons and shouting their worthless threats. He was laughing, laughing so hard it hurt. The idiots, look at them cower, look at them cry. Maggots, *worms* . Repent, and maybe He'd be gracious enough to devour you instead of sentencing you to hell.

There it was. The daylight was shining through the doorway down into this dark, dingy hole. He was almost out, almost free. Nothing but easily severed flesh and bone stand in his way. Weak, pathetic bodies with weak, pathetic athiest souls.

*"I'm coming Pineapple head, don't you fucking worry."*

---

A tug, that same familiar nudge he'd felt before, pulling him up off the bed before his eyes could even open. He.. he was dreaming, he thought. This wasn't really happening.. but it felt so real. Incoherently drifting between dream and reality. Which one was right? Where was he? He was so.. so mad. So angry.. but at what?

---

He was running, so close to escape. It was right there..

Netting sprang up out of nowhere. He roared in anger when it scooped him up. He starting ripping at the ropes, gnawing like an animal. How dare they trap him, how dare they even *touch* him. Bastards, godless bloody fucking heathens! Keep your disgusting hands away!

They can't keep him caged, no one can. ' *DO YOU FUCKING KNOW WHO I AM!?*'

More ropes, more tethers, constricting around him, tying his arms down, holding his legs together, keeping still his thrashing body. Around his elbows and wrists, pulled tight behind him. Ankles and knees squeezed so painfull together that he collapsed from the



nauseating waves of pleasure it brought. A blade at his throat, two blades... three.

*"I'm going to DESTROY ALL OF YOU FUCKING BASTARDS!"*

Voices shouted back and forth, muffled and gargled by his anger as he screamed and flailed. They couldn't keep him, he had a job to do. He had one man's heart to break and another's to save. He had his own happiness to pursue, now that he finally understood. Decades and centuries of confusion and loneliness and slow descent into madness. Of wandering aimlessly, feeling like a piece was missing. And now that's it's finally together, when all the questions floating around in the back of his mind had been answered, these stupid sons of bitches got in his way.

He roared again, gritting his teeth and managing to rip one arm free of the bindings. He grabbed and yanked, making one of his many captors stumble forward enough for him to claw into the side of their face. A fist came from another direction, smashing into his face and throwing him backward.

Red, blood and anger and just red. Red everywhere.

This wasn't happening.

*Help...*

xx

Shikamaru's eyes snapped open when he jerked from the strike, his face throbbing in fake pain. He gasped and pushed back, tripping over the cot and smashing the back of his skull against the wall.

He cried out and rolled, falling to the floor as his cot clattered loudly to his side.

More tugging, more pulling. But from everywhere, and nowhere.

It was a nightmare, but it wasn't. It couldn't be fake, he'd had nightmares, plenty of them. You can't feel them like that. The ropes burning as they drag across your skin, the tightness in his chest as he sprinted down some stone corridor, the slippery warmth of blood, covering him, soaking in and absorbing in his skin, fueling his rage and mania.

No, Jashin no.. that hadn't been just a dream.

He pushed himself back into a normal sitting position, still breathing heavily, and ran his hands through his hair. Wide eyes scanned the room, his little base with only the barest of bare necessities. Yes.. he was awake now. He'd been awake before, for only a second. Then slipped back into the dream. That'd hadn't been real. But it wasn't fake.

It was Hidan. Something Hidan was experiencing, he knew it to be true even though there was no logical reason to believe it. Logic was unnecessary, he knew it was true. He knew without knowing.

His chest hurt and his stomach churned with the need to get up and run to him, to find him wherever he is and save him from whoever those people were. But this time was different. He didn't know where to go, there was no possession of his body to direct him. Nothing but the nagging urge to do something, anything... to help him.

"Fuuck." He groaned, getting up and shrugging into his clothes and quickly putting his hair into a sloppy ponytail. He wasn't going back to sleep now, his insides jittered from the lasting memories, the unfiltered fury Hidan felt, the frantic rage that made him sloppy and careless. His deadly determination to reach that light at the end of the tunnel...

Someone was after them, apparently. It wasn't just Shikamaru, they wanted Hidan as well. And whoever it was was apparently having a hell of a lot more success with his lover. Too much success, actually. The younger Jashinist hadn't been confronted in the same way, and he hadn't gotten quite as violent..

*Uh.. yes. Yes you did.*

"Shut up.." He said to himself aloud. "They were trying to seduce me..."

He froze, this had to have something to do with their shared immortality. It was Jashinists that attacked him.. and in the dream or vision or whatever it was the zealot was under the impression that his captors had been of their faith as well.

*"We know you prefer boys. We'll make it quick and painless"*

They didn't want to *just* have sex with him. They wanted to make a blood bond. They wanted to leech his immortality just as he'd done to Hidan.

If it were true, then that meant... someone had blabbed about their secret. But the only people who knew were the Akatsuki and himself. No one else-No wait. Neji. Neji knew too.

No... no way. He'd never...

His eyes narrowed and hands fell limp to his side.

*Neji wouldn't do that.*

He was the only one... There's no way in hell the Akatsuki would. They have too much to lose. They're barely dangling on the edge of legality as it is, thanks to Shikamaru.

The real question here though wasn't so much as who had told, seeing as word had leaked and there was no undoing it.

*"Unless you kill them.."*

He shook his head, staring around the empty room quizzically. What the hell was that? Where the fuck had that thought come from? He went to the dingy mirror and studied it, leaning in closer than

necessary and squinting. Hm, His eyes still had that weird faded look to them, but other than that everything was the same...

Jashin above... he was so rattled he was hearing voices...

Back to the topic... the real matter of importance was why these Jashinists wanted the two of them. Had they broken some unspoken rule? Were they concerned about the number of immortals increasing? It was a somewhat taxing bit of information, knowing these psycho cult members could literally reproduce A-sexually, then had to go around murdering people to stay alive. 2 out of 6 billion wasn't all that significant really, but seeing as those two would never, ever decrease due to death, the number could only continue to increase. Maybe their fellow Jashinists were looking at this situation like an outbreak to be quarantined...

He absently started pacing, tapping his fingertips together while he tried to organize his thoughts.

But even more importantly than that, how he was going to find Hidan and rescue his troublesome ass?

Really, how could someone like him keep getting into so much trouble? If the psycho wanted to break him of his reliance on time, Shikamaru needed to break *him* of his ideals that he's invincible. All anyone has to do is keep them from doing their sacrifices, and immortality becomes obsolete.

Albino idiot.

He slipped into his boots, and stood up. He would have to think, It seemed. Get the gears turning in his brain again to make a plan to find Hidan, as well as deal with these bastards coming after them. And that requires fresh air, nicotine, and maybe some caffeine.

That nightmare or whatever it was had made for a rather restless sleep. He closed his eyes and sighed before activation his teleportation jutsu.

8 a.m. and this day was already a drag.

---

Alright, this is what he knew. Hidan went to break up with Kakuzu and probably let whoever was in charge of the Akatsuki know what he was doing. Well, maybe. That would be the responsible thing to do.. so actually that probably never even occurred to him...

But he had definitely went to speak with Kakuzu. Shikamaru knew the two had relocated their residence, but hadn't the slightest clue where. So that was a dead end. Akatsuki weren't particularly settled anywhere, and made their base wherever their most current case was. At least he assumed so, and there's always the chance that even they didn't know where the money grubbing bastard had dragged Hidan away to. So that was another dead end... or was it?

The ring, he thought, snapping his head up from its previously steady gaze on the sidewalk. Right! He still had that little thing somewhere in his big bag of belongings.

Dammit, of course he had to actually leave and wander randomly for an hour before he'd figure out a lead. It was anyone's guess as to whether Itachi could give him any clues, but surely he at least knew where he lived. It wouldn't help much, unless his little vision had been false and he was just delayed with Kakuzu. In which case he would steal him away right in front of the greedy old bastard and dare him to try and get him back. Probably end up pissing Hidan off but hey, Kakuzu was a bitch and Shika intended to make sure he was thoroughly aware of it.

He blinked again, coming to the stop on the sidewalk.

Why the hell was he so violent today?

Was this the aftermath of yesterday's events? He'd had a taste for blood and apparently he liked it, *after throwing up a bit* .

"Jashin... what have you done to me..." He muttered, starting off toward his little headquarters, at least until he felt another tug, this one distinctly pulled backward, and he peeked out of the corner of his eye behind him to find a police officer stalking toward him, features in a grimace and eyes dead set on Shikamaru.

"Oh you're kidding me..." He mumbled, taking the time to sigh before he coiled his body, pushing chakra into his legs for a quick getaway.

"SIR! Please stay where you are!" The cop called out, footsteps getting quicker. On the one hand, Shika was happy to see that this man had noticed him coming toward him, and in an instant his fists were hazed in a flowerey blueish green chakra, it said that not all cops were complete idiots.

But on the other, he was a little ticked. *Of course* he got the one intelligent law officer on the one day he was actually in a hurry.

"Sorry, I'm kind of really busy." He called out behind him. And just as he was about to spring up to the rooftops, something metal slapped tight around his wrists and his chakra vanished so suddenly that he almost felt a backlash.

Goddammit, these fucking handcuffs were really starting to piss him off. He made a mental note to sacrifice whoever made them, then inwardly cringed at himself.

*Shika, you only kill bad guys...*

And horny women too, apparently...

"Please sir, don't fight me and I won't make it hard." The policeman said, he had soft brown eyes, and Shika immediatly assumed him to be a rookie. He didn't have the condescending undertone when he spoke that most seasoned officers did.

"Let me go and I won't fight you. I really don't have the fucking time for this right now." Shikamaru half growled, half whined.

"If you don't make a scene I'll help you with your bail... Mister Nara."

He paused, studying the orange-haired man with the soft eyes and tired posture.

"You have quite a few crimes to attend to, but I know who you are and I really don't have the skills to try and force you behind bars. I promise I'll make it as painless as possible if you come with me."

Still staring cautiously, the immortal's dark eyes flicked from the officer to the police cruiser some distance behind him, and back. He couldn't tell if this man was serious or not. He didn't look like he'd put up much of a fight, he was young, possibly younger than Shikamaru.

Damn this was troublesome.

"And who are you?"

"You may call me Juugo." The man smiled as if Shikamaru had already agreed, relaxing slightly and starting to take a step forward.

"Okay, Juugo. Here's the thing. I have way more important things to deal with than the stupid shit they're trying to pin on me just because I quit the force. So either you walk away on your own, Or I show you first-hand why they're afraid of dealing with me themselves and sent a newbie like you out after me."

"I just recognized you on the street mister Nara I-"

"Yeah. That's great. Don't care. Now take these things off before I get pissed." He extended his arm with the chakra-blocking metal hanging from it and fixed himself in a staring contest before the officer suddenly gave him a dark grin. There really could have been a more perfectly malicious twist to this situation.

He inwardly groaned, and before his eyes the nice young man's sleeve exploded as his hand morphed into some monstrous

abomination. He was grabbed and violently thrown toward the cruiser before he could really make sense of what just happened.

Pedestrians screamed and darted away as his body crashed and crumpled against the metal. And before he had time to even reposition himself his hands were grabbed and secured behind him and something latched onto his ponytail, using it as leverage to slam his face repeatedly into the heavily dented metal.

Finally coming to the conclusion that the nice young officer was mercilessly beating him, he struck back, jumping and twisting to pull his legs up between them, plant them on his now thick-skinned, demonized chest, and push him away.

He fell hard on his ass, but at least it got the beast off him.

The 'rookie' officer was now more monster than man, it seemed. Shikamaru managed to keep himself from gawking only for the fact that a massive, stone-like fist was speeding toward his face.

He pulled himself farther down with his heels and Juugos arm impaled itself in the side of the door. He swung his legs upward, a last ditch effort to create enough room for him to struggle to his feet without the use of his hands, and slammed his foot into the mans groin.

After a roar of anger and pain it had the desired effect, and he stumbled. The Nara uttered a small apology (because really, he felt guilty for resorting to that,) before rolling himself back to his feet.

Anger, he needed to be angry to get out of these cuffs. And for some reason it wasn't coming as easily as he'd hoped.

He took a breath and darted off to find a more secluded area, seeing as people were starting to stop and watch the scene. He couldn't have witnesses if he ended up going overboard and killing this guy like the last few.



Damn.. he should have known something was up when he was cuffed without reading his rights. Dammit Shikamaru, *stupid scatterbrained idiot*.

Heavy footsteps and angry grunting could be heard from right behind him as he scrambled to find somewhere to escape attention. His mind was bouncing around everywhere, still void of the rage that filled him with that secondary power when his chakra couldn't be relied upon.

Who was this guy, what the hell kind of jutsu user was he to transform himself like that? Why was he willing to beat Shikamaru into oblivion just to get him in that car? Usually most cops tried to get the job over with, and whipped out a tazer or something. This Juugo fellow just seemed like he wanted to hurt him.

"You're insulting yourself by running away!" A guttural voice cracked out behind him, not at all like the soft, almost sweet voice the guy had before.

"An almighty, supposedly unkillable Jashinist, running for his life. *Pathetic.*"

*Running for his life... running away.. to save his immortal life? You dumb son of a bitch.*

Ah. There is was.

*Thank you Jashin.*

His eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched, and he stopped on a dime and whirled, lifting his leg and smashing his boot into an unexpected mutant face.

"I'm not fucking running you piece of shit." He growled out as the man was knocked roughly to the ground.

"It's called intelligence, Maybe my counterpart lacks it. But I like to be smart when I can."

At the subtle mention of Hidan, Juugo's eyes narrowed further than they already were, giving Shikamaru all the information he needed. This guy wasn't a cop, he was just another bastard trying to force him to relinquish his gift from Jashin. And even moreso, he knew Hidan, and he knew that he was currently imprisoned.

Sweet adrenaline rushed him, and his face burned as he was filled with a boost from Jashin as he happily let his rage bloom. He was just about fucking sick of being underestimated and insulted. And this fucking idiot thought he could trick him so easily?

He flexed his arms, snapping the metal cuffs like nothing and pouring his regained chakra into his hands, making it thin as he could into a blade.

"You have 5 seconds to tell me where my partner is."

He swung, unable to resist the grin that stretched across his features as his opponent jumped to his feet, looking discouraged at how easily Shikamaru had escaped the meager restraints.

Juugo lifted his monster hand to stop it, and Shika only pumped more chakra into his weaponized hand, laughing victoriously when it sliced right through the stoney skin and the officer shrieked.

"Wanna know what's *pathetic* ?" He sneered, cutting off chakra flow and dragging the blood-stained hand across his tongue.

The half-monster growled, and in a mere second his hand reformed itself, making the immortal hesitate for only a second before leaping far back to avoid a strike.

"That this is already over..." He said darkly, grabbing his pike and snapping it to full extension as his skin slowly darkened to ritual. "Last chance to tell me what I wanna know."

The monster charged, but Shikamaru only laughed, lifting his legs and pooling not only chakra, but the extra unexplainable strength he had from his anger in his thigh, he kicked outward, cackling like mad when the soul of his boot smashed into the man's face with skin-crawling series of cracks. His opponent went somersaulting backward, crashing over and over onto the cement and continuing on his roll until he crashed through the window of a shop. Maybe this man's jutsu made him considerably stronger, but it also turned him into a brainless ogre. Fucking idiot. Why did everyone have to be so stupid? It really turned life into a drag.

A snarl ripped through the air, and the monster-man's head reappeared as he barreled forward, the skin of its face contorting and writhing as it fixed itself, and swinging his arm to smash through a pillar that was in his way with reckless disregard. Shikamaru huffed, there was no way this guy was going to talk, dammit. He'd lost any intelligence he'd had when he transformed. His opponent lunged toward him, running on all fours now, more animal than man. Shikamaru held his ground, sighing and rolling his eyes before holding the pike up over his heart, glaring for a heartbeat before he shoved it through his own chest.

Juugo froze, or would have frozen if he hadn't gone crashing to the ground.

"Sorry Jashin. Not much of an offering.." He spat, Yanking out the stake without taking any time to enjoy the moment. There were so many onlookers, so many witnesses... this was horrible. So much for intelligence, emotion won out again. And this time he'd purposely let it!

Sighing, he activated the shadow jutsu, and all 8 of the people who'd gotten to see the show screamed and angrily protested as little hands shot from tarpools that gathered beneath their feet snatched the cell phones they held in their hands and crushed them, whether they were capable of taking pictures or videos or not.

Damn this technology, so troublesome.

How the fuck Hidan and his idiocracy had managed to stay off the radar so well was a question he didn't think would ever be answered. Shikamaru had even been in a business that should enable him to know where all the loopholes were. But damn, it was really fucking hard to keep predicting stuff. His head wasn't working properly today, or recently.

It had to be because of Hidan.. He was just distracted from the other day. Butterflies from their little session of hankey-pankey still lingering in his head and fogging him to anything happening around him in the world. It was like he was on autopilot, and the real Shikamaru only came back to check that everything was still right every so often, despite the way things kept going wrong.

Like right now.

There were still too many witnesses here. Too many people whose stories would match, too many people who would describe Shikamaru Nara as the man who had somehow murdered this cop with some black voodoo magic. It didn't matter that he had legally been defending himself, that the man hadn't read him his rights and may very well not even be an actual cop. That he had thrown the first punch.

Nope. All that mattered was that Shikamaru killed him in cold blood in broad daylight with an audience. No one would remember anything else. Even at this moment some of them might still not even be aware that he's dead. In fact most of them were rather focused on the large bleeding hole in Shikamaru's chest that miraculously wasn't affecting him at all.

And now was the question as to what to do. Would a threat be enough to keep them all quiet? He already had people out to get him, Hidan was in trouble, and the only common thing they shared aside from this perverted romance was the inability to be killed. And the absolute last thing he needed was to have not only Jashinists and fake cops on his ass, but FBI and whatever the fuck else might want a piece of him.

*Kill them...*

Right.. right.. just kill all of them and hide the evidence and everything will be just peachy...

NO! Damn!

He put two hands on each side of his head, what was this? What was this fucking insanity speaking to him in his thoughts? Some little demon whispering it's desires...

He snapped his eyes open, letting out a surge of chakra to create a shadow clone for each of the trembling, awestruck, terrified, amazed people still standing and staring, utterly afraid to move.

Each of them jumped and gasped and screamed respectively when they were grabbed by the collar of their shirts and held so close that their noses almost touched the clones.

"If you tell *anyone* that I was here. I will ensure a fate worth than death for you and everyone you love." They each echo'd in a whisper, gauging the fear in each victims eyes and adding in a few more threats to those who didn't seem as affected.

Meanwhile the original Shikamaru knelt down to shove his hands through the corpses pockets. The body had returned to normal now, and it tugged a little at his heartstrings to see the original kind face of this man. He wasn't exactly sure why he suddenly felt so empathetic, but he managed to push the feeling away by reminding himself that this gentle looking face was nothing but a disguise. Juugo had attacked him viciously out of the blue for no apparent reason. And after Shika had thought him to actually be intelligent too...

He supposed maybe it struck some chord under his concious. He felt bad for doing what he did, but he didn't have a choice right? The guy would have killed him if he didn't do it first.

*You're smart enough to end fights without death. When did you forget that?*

"Just shut up..." He mumbled sullenly to himself. Juugo attacked him, would have captured him and done Jashin knows what to him just like whatever those girls had planned. He was a bad man and his death was nothing if not a good thing... right?

His hand came across something cold and hard, and he withdrew it to study the object. Dog-tags? Was this man in the military?

He turned it over a few times, it was engraved with just a bunch of numbers on one side and the horizontal 8 that stood for Infinity on the other.

There weren't any other forms of I.d. None at all. Not only was this disturbing, it was a downright drag. There were no clues at all except this single little tag. He didn't have *anything* on him. Not even standard police gear.

He quickly stuffed it in his pocket and straightened when the clones all finished their threats and poofed away. Well.. it was the only lead he had, aside from going home to find that ring. Beggars can't be choosers.

He nodded to all the wide-eyed people and activated the fast transfer jutsu. Tickled slightly by the thought that whoever these guys were that were trying to kidnap him were just awful at their jobs... and still slightly haunted by performing his first unplanned, unnessesary sacrifice.

---

Shikamaru had never felt his mind racing quite so fast. In fact it was jumping from thought to thought so unreasonably quickly that he quite literally couldn't tell if he were thinking anything at all as he moved in his bodiless state back to his little residence.

Something was going on with him, his brain wasn't functioning right, and there really couldn't be a worse time for it to fail him. Hidan was in trouble, being held captive and having Jashin knows what done to him. Shikamaru himself was in danger, not only because people were after him but because each encounter with these thugs grew sloppier and sloppier and if he didn't put an end to it soon the whole world would know who and what he is and then he would be so fucking far up shit creek that it wouldn't matter if he had a paddle or not. The fact that he was suddenly hearing voices that he knew were not thoughts of his own and he didn't recognize as his Demon God's was definitely concerning him, and then there was still the matter of having to somehow locate Hidan and rescue him, possibly fight and maim-if-not-kill Kakuzu, and... and... and who even fucking knows what else might occur after that!?

And of course all of this had to happen when things were finally starting to look up, when everything was finally as it should be.  
*Dammit Jashin, you couldn't just let it be.*

Though in retrospect he did have 6 months of vague regularity to enjoy. And honestly, he should have expected the zealot to leave chaos in his wake. It was unrealistic for him to be upset at the man for it... but really, this was ridiculous. He couldn't blame it all on being in a fog. Even when he was running on nothing but caffeine in 36 hours back when he'd first met the psychotic new neighbor that had somehow morphed into not only his Jashinist teacher, but the man he couldn't imagine being without as well, he still hadn't been so blatantly stupid. Well.. He couldn't really say that, he supposed, seeing as he'd continuously made bad decisions every damn time that fucking idiot showed back up in his life...

**GOD THIS WAS SO TROUBLESOME!**

He slipped back into reality in his room, hesitating, looking around at it darkly for a second when his skin prickled. Something didn't *feel* right... but there was nothing to signal any reason for it. Hm, no one could have managed to slip in here and avoid all his traps, and yet

he felt far more unsettled standing here in this same spot than he'd been just a couple hours ago.

*Nerves. It's just stress...*

Yeah.. that had to be it. No one but he and Hidan knew how to get in, no one but he and Hidan had the jutsu.

Sighing in irritation at himself, he started toward the still overturned cot, setting it back upright and slipping the giant duffelbag from underneath it. After what felt like an eternity of unzipping and searching through endless pockets and hideyholes, he finally came across what he wanted.

A smile crooked the edge of his mouth as he pulled out the smooth metal ring. Damn, he was glad he kept this... he just hoped desperately that it still worked. He didn't know if these things were like phones or what. He didn't know anything about them, and because of that thought he made a mental note to look into it. At the very least it would give him something to do when this ordeal blows over.

Without hesitation he slipped it on and trickled chakra into it. Not understanding the small wash of anxiety that came over him, but not letting it get in his way. He really needed to stop dragging that poor man into he and Hidan's affairs...

"... Eh... Itachi?"

Silence for one second.. two.. three...

"It's Shikamaru. I need your help on something."

Six heartbeats and no answer. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, turning it to a scratch before sitting onto the edge of his cot.

Damn his nose was itchy all the sudden. Wasn't there an old wives tale about that? It meant someone was talking about him



somewhere. Hah, maybe it was the sharingan user himself, trying to avoid him.

A sneeze ripped violently through him then, so much so that it almost knocked him from the wobbly surface he was on.

"Damn..." He muttered, snuffling. "Do immortals have allergies?"

*"I don't believe so, Shikamaru Nara."*

He was mercilessly spared from the humiliating noise that surely would have escaped him at the sudden unfamiliar voice pervading his thoughts by the sheer shock of receiving a response. He'd already dismissed the thought that the ring was of any more use, and certainly hadn't expected to hear anyone other than the elder Uchiha reply.

*"I apologize for my delayed response. Itachi Uchiha is currently unavailable. I am Nagato, You may call me Pein."*

Shikamaru's first thought was that Itachi had mentioned Nagato on more than one occasion. And If he recalled correctly, this person was also more or less the leader of the Akatsuki.

He was speaking directly with the big boss-man himself. What an honor...

His second thought was that this guy sounded like even more of an emotionless robot than Itachi. And that significantly dulled any excitement the moment may have caused.

"Uh.. Pein, sir. I, uh... I really need Itachi's assistance on this matter."

*"He is on a reconnaissance mission right now. What is it you require his assistance for?"*

Hm. Despite the way he spoke, Nagato didn't seem too awful of a man. But still the novice Jashinist wasn't exactly sure how to respond. Should he tell him that Hidan had gotten himself in trouble?

The man undoubtedly knew about their involvement, seeing as he had greeted Shikamaru almost as if he knew him personally. But still, did Nagato know as much as Itachi? Probably... but there was always a chance..

BAHH! Who cares!? Itachi was busy and if he wanted help then it looked like this *Pein* was the man for the job.

"I believe Hidan is in trouble."

Brief silence on the other end, but long enough to send the immortal nervously to his feet and push him to pace the room.

Once more he scratched his nose, letting the thought that there must be bad air circulation in here come and go from his mind. It kind of went past itching, now it was kind of a burn...

" *What leads you to this conclusion?*"

"Uh... It's hard to explain."

"*I'm aware of the connection you share. Explain.*"

Hm. Well he was just as blunt as Itachi... well he might as well just say it.

"When he gets himself into a predicament that he can't get himself out of, I sort of... feel it. Sort of an anxiety thing. This time I actually shared some kind of telepathic connection with him, so I'm thinking it's pretty serious."

"... *What happened during this connection.*"

Again he paused. It wasn't really something he wanted to share with this so far emotionless stranger, but if he wanted help then he had to cooperate.

"He was trying to escape, there are numerous people holding him, and he was overpowered."

*"Do you have any idea as to who his captors are?"*

"He was under the impression that they were Jashinists... and I've also been having trouble myself with them. A group two days ago attempted to kidnap me, one of them had a tattoo signaling their involvement in the religion, and then just a while ago a man posing as a law officer attacked me after trying to arrest me without reading me the miranda rights. I searched him afterward and found only a necklace with what looks like a serial number and a lemniscate to give any clue as to who he was."

Silence on the other end. Shikamaru continued to pace, the unsettling feeling was growing worse, and the air seemed like it was growing thicker, making him breathe heavily. He was also just uncomfortable in general about speaking with the head honcho here on his little mini-panic attack. It didn't help that his brain registered Nagato as someone above him on the chain of command and he had slipped into what he referred to as soldier-mode while explaining the situation. "I believe word may have leaked about our.. uh.. Secret. I think maybe they're trying to sort of quarantine us."

Again a sudden sneeze racked his body, and he swore after viciously rubbing his nose. Dammit, if immortals couldn't have allergies then what the fuck was this sneezing shit going on here?

*It's more than a sneeze, child. Take the hint.*

He blinked, now that voice, he knew that one. That bone-rattling, skin-crawling sound that gave him butterflies and petrified him at the same time... That was Jashin. His brows furrowed, *now* he says something? *Now* he wants to help? He was getting sick of this, the Demon God just needed to decide whether he liked him or not and pick a damn side.

*"What are your coordinates?"* Pein's voice said, reminding him that he was still on the 'phone'.

"Uh.." He replied dumbly, looking around. Coordinates? Was he asking to latitude and longitude or what?

*"Where are you right now?"* Came a slightly quick and annoyed response. Well at least he knew this guy wasn't a robot.

"I'm at my... house." He said, thinking it would sound stupid to say 'secret base', as he'd come to think of it as.

*"And you've had people following and engaging you?"*

"Yes.."

*"Get out."*

"What!?"

*"Leave your residence immediatly!"* Nagato growled . *"You're sneezing because of flammable noxious gases in the air. It's a trap. Leave now."*

Shikamaru froze, a whirlwind of emotions making it impossible for him to command his feet to move. Since when did gas make people sneeze? How had anyone got in here to boobytrap it? Why was Pein worried about him, especially knowing that he can't die?

"Right." He finally forced out, whirling to frantically shove his sparse belongings in his bag. How could that be true, no one had tampered with his traps. No one could get in? What the hell was happening here? Had he been outwitted? That wasn't possible.. was it? He *has* been really out-of-it lately, but that happened when you had such bullshit taking over your life.

*"I'll have someone sent to assist you in finding Hidan."*

Good. Maybe it would be Itachi... but he was on a mission. So those chances were slim, and the only other person who knew Hidan well enough to help was...

"NOT KAKUZU!" He shouted, but before the bodiless voice had the chance to respond the entire world seemed to become suddenly hushed. His lungs seared with a lack of oxygen, skin prickled in the forboding silence, and his eyes widened at the realization that the explosive gas was literally filling his body. The only reason why he wasn't dead was because he was healing fast enough not to be poisoned. But that didn't stop the 'flammable' part of the equation.

He heard two distant clacks, like the sound rocks made when you hit them together, and then all he could see was blinding orange and red.

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Chaos, pain, fire, destruction, more pain. Nothing but pain and oblivion. All consuming and unrelenting. He didn't know where he was, couldn't remember what he was doing. Only the pain.

He tried to scream, but he couldn't control his throat. His skin was burning, he could feel it, and smell it. He was in hell. *Damn you Jashin, you let me die.*

It hurt so bad. It's all he could think about. All he could see was fire. This wasn't fair, pain was good. Pain meant he was alive. But he couldn't be alive when he was roasting like a turkey in hell.

*I did everything for you. I was a good person. I shouldn't be here.*

Fire and pain and heat and that God-aweful smell. There was nothing else. Nothing. Everything was gone. Everyone he knew. All the effort he'd put into living an immortal life was wasted. This couldn't be right. This couldn't be hell. He couldn't be dead. He would have been dead long ago if it was possible.

*I can't move..*

Not even a finger twitch.

*I can't.. breathe..*

Was it another nightmare? No.. nightmares weren't like this. This was happening, this was real...

This was hell.

There was a tug on him.. on his head. *Jashin?* Pulling at his hair.. wait.. his hair? How did he have hair?

"Collect the rest of the pieces. He can't fight back now."

*Who.. who is that?* He didn't know that voice. Gah, damn this fire! *I can't see!*

With nothing more than that thought, the pain ebbed only slightly. *Damn this smell...*

"There's one over there. Don't miss any, he needs him intact."

So calm, how could the voice be so calm in this? All the fire and pain... Who was it?

A cool breeze hit his face, and he moaned from the beautiful absence of the agony. He moaned? He made sound? He could talk!

"What.. what's going on.." He slurred out. Still no sight, damn. But oh well, at least the fire was gone.

"Shut up." The calm voice replied, before breaking into a coughing fit. Disgusting wet coughs. Yuck... who the hell was this? What was happening?

"Is this hell?" He breathed aloud. It couldn't be.. the pain was going away. He could feel his skin repairing itself, feel his hair being pulled, his eyes healing...

His sight came back, blurred and foggy. Dammit, damn it all!

*Jashin! What is this?*

More pulling on his hair, his vision wavered, and cleared. And he found himself looking directly into someones face.

Green eyes, white hair, sickly sagging skin.

"I said shut up." The face told him, and Shikamaru's newfound gaze ventured to the side. Giant flames towered behind the glaring man, people were moving about in them, spraying water and foam to extinguish it. They seemes to be searching the debree, the remnants of the building he'd been inside before...

He winced as his hair was yanked at again, and his view changed. Why was he swinging?

There was a big van up ahead, black... just like the one he'd drove into the harbor.

His eyes stretched wide. He was alive, this person had pulled him from hell. But it wasn't hell, it was a fire. His building exploded! That's right!

Pein! He was talking to that Akatsuki leader! He said he'd send help!

"Are you Akatsuki?" He said, still trying to figure out why he was swaying back and forth.

His rescuer clicked his tongue, "I was told you weren't the same as that idiot that escaped. But you don't listen and talk just as much."

The side door to the van slid open and the entire world spun violently before he crashed into what he assumed was the wall, and then the floor. He tried to move his arms, to pull himself from the ground, but he couldn't seem to control anything other than his mouth and eyes.

"Kimimaro, sir! I believe we have all the parts."

"Double check, put them in the bag when you're finished. Do not miss anything, I'll kill you if you do." The green eye'd man said matter-of-factly.

"Kimimaro? Did Pein send you? What's going on?"

Shikamaru received a sigh in response, and the man got into the van, shutting the door and sitting crosslegged on the floor beside him.

*Why can't I fucking get up!?*

"Shikamaru Nara. I am forbidden to torture you, but if you say another word I will stuff your head into a bag and beat you senseless. Understand? I want silence."

*My head... my head?*

Oh no... oh noo! That couldn't be right...

With a near audible snap, realization set in. Why he couldn't move, why his hair was pulled so much, why he was swinging as his rescuer walked...

The building hadn't been the only thing that exploded. The gas had been in his body, he... he was in pieces!

"That's better.." Kimimaro said, pushing his fingertips into his temples and rubbing. "I have a terrible headache... so just cooperate and make it easier for both of us."

Cooperate? COOPERATE!? He was a head sitting here on the floor of the van, what the fuck could he possibly do other than cooperate!?

Oh shit, no... this was bad. This was really bad. That man didn't rescue him, he was the one that set the trap. He was just like those other people, only he obviously wasn't such an idiot. He'd taken advantage of Shikamaru's immortality and used it against him, coming at it from a whole other angle and reducing him to a literal pile of flesh and bone so he couldn't resist.



Son of a bitch. SON OF A GODDAMN BITCH! Noo this couldn't be happening. They had him, they actually had him this time and there was nothing he could do!

Fuck! Dammit!

"I'll kill you..." He said, sounding unthreatening due to the shock he was still locked in. "I'll kill all of you." He growled, unable to put any ferocity behind it. He was a head, what could he do?

"Ohh. And you were doing so well. Oh well, here comes the bag..."

"You better fucking not! I swear to Jashin I'll rip out your guts and hang you with them you piece of fucking shit! Give me my fucking body!"

His captor reached behind him, searching presumably for the bag.

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD! I'LL SACRIFICE YOU JUST LIKE THAT COP! I DON'T EVEN FUCKING CARE ANYMORE!"

It can't be happening. God how could he be so stupid? He didn't even have the ring to call for help on. It was probably still on his finger, wherever the fuck that was at.

"Ah, Juugo. I'm a little irritated at you for that... But he served his purpose at least. It was his own fault for being so rash." The sickly looking man said, pulling a small burlap sack from the darkness behind him.

"You.. he.. he was one of you?"

"Yes. He was to distract you while we broke into your little sanctuary and located the gas lines. I admit that I thought you clever before that little outburst. We lost many men to all your traps, and a few more trying to set them back up."

"You bastards!"

"I'm giving you one last chance. Shut your mouth or I'll stuff you in here and shove you in a cooler to escape your wretched shouting."

"I'll send you straight to hell..." Shikamaru snarled, trying desperately to control the helpless rage that had him on the verge of tears. He couldn't let this man capture him like some rat in a cage. There had to be something... ANYTHING!

"I'll kill you. Get that fucking thing away from me!"

Think Shikamaru! There has to be something!

"Let go you motherfucker. I'll fucking snap every one of your bones individually! You son of a bitch!"

Nothing.. there was nothing. He was trapped, outmatched.. the genius strategist had been bested. And now he had to endure whatever means of torture this man and his affiliates had planned until his immortality ran dry with lack of sacrifices and Jashin revoked his gift.

The Perfect Jashinist, Hidan had called him. How pathetic... how humiliating..

*Jashin.. I'm sorry. All that work and I've failed.*

A large thump ripped him from his thoughts. The van lurched to the side and bounced back, and Kimimaro released his grip on Shikamaru's hair to steady himself. He cried out when his face hit the ground and he rolled, coming to a stop with a perfect view right up at the white haired man, staring calmly at the ceiling.

A heartbeat of eerie silence stretched on before an animalistic roar exploded into the air outside.

It was so familiar, he thought. He'd heard it before.. but where? He couldn't recall.

"What the hell was that?" His captor asked only millisecond before the side door to the van was ripped completely off and tossed away.

Shikamaru gawked as billions of little threads darted into the vehicle, wrapping themselves around everything and wrenching the metal apart like it were tin foil. The entire wall suddenly looked like a can that had been pried open with a screwdriver, and then he saw it.

A Noh mask on a giant mass of wriggling threads, molded into the form of a four-legged beast.

"IM RIGHT HERE!" His own voice shouted unwillingly, mouth moving faster than his mind. That had to be one of Kakuzu's monsters. Which meant he was saved. That also meant Pein had gone against his request but he couldn't even be mad because thank Jashin above *he was saved!*

Kimimaru shifted and suddenly the beast was impaled with a bunch of white sticks... wait.. those looked like bones..

The man suddenly erupted into a human porcupine, shooting out millions of little white shrapnel at the beast.

The monster quivered and growled, sucking the bones into its body with audible snaps to signal their breaking, completely unaffected by the attack. In the blink of an eye the mask opened its mouth, simultaneously reaching a threaded arm in to scoop up Shika's head and pull him to safety before a giant blast of electricity exploded from its mouth, desolating the van and the man inside both.

Without hesitation the beast turned and launched another electric attack on the men who saw the explosion and were rushing to help.

The bodiless head of Shikamaru tangled among the monster's threads watched in awe and horror as the men seized for a second, their body glowing from the electricity before they puffed out and literally burst like a balloon.

*Thank Jashin. I don't have a stomach right now...* He could barely even process the massacre in front of him, let alone form any coherent thoughts about it. This was the old bastard's little minion, but where was *he* at? If they were causing this much destruction by themselves... Good God he didn't even want to finish the thought. He could probably summarize that having kicked Kakuzu's ass that time half a year ago might possibly have been a fluke.

After all the geezer *did* just escape a prison he'd been held at for an entire fucking year...

Another thread monster landed heavily in front of them, making a soft clattering noise and holding up two large burlap sacks absolutely soaked with and dripping blood.

His blood, he instantly realized. The second beast had reclaimed the bits and pieces of his body. He was thrilled only for a second before he realized what was going to have to happen next.

His arch fucking enemy was going to have to literally sew him back together with those disgusting threads.

*Oh please no...*

Dear Jashin.. He'd rather be in a bag..

The thread minions seemed to have some sort of conversation with each other in a series of grunts, clicks, and groans. Then finally they both turned and Shikamaru was instantly cast into a dizzy oblivion as the one holding his head melded into the other and they launched up into the air. Spiraling up hundreds and hundreds of feet, away from the bloody mess and the dying flames of his temporary home, and then soaring out over the small city.

It hardly even registered, what with the thought that he was going to have to rely on one of the only people he hated to fix him back up while he was completely defenseless.

He shouldn't say it... he knew he shouldn't. But dammit, this could not possibly be more of a drag...

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A/N-

BAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. Oh hey guys, by the way, April fools. I'm not discontinuing the story, I haven't lost interest, and I'll NEVER get tired of Naruto. e\_e Seriously.

*Wierdo... it's October.*

Hey, random voice in my head, shut the fuck up. I don't conform to society!

xD But, yeah, sorry everyone. I had to get you back. Because, like, not even ONE review? I know the last chapter was bad but I didn't think it would make you go blind or vomit or anything! Jeez!

Heh, so yeah. YOU MAD BRO? COME AT ME!

Anyway, just to be clear, I FULLY PLAN TO FINISH THIS STORY, NO MATTER WHAT. Unless I die... then it would be rather difficult.

Ahem. So yes, Kakuzu is back, again. And this time he's an ally. YAY! And also Hooray! Nagato finally gets a few lines! Instead of just a random mentioning of his name every so often. Kuzu sure got there fast though huh? Hmm, I wonder if Pein actually even sent him or not. .

*Wierdo shut up don't spoil shit!*

Wow, I'm just in a really spazzy mood today, hah, sorry everyone. I need to end this note before I make it longer than the fucking chapter.

So, I apologize if Juugo or Kimimaro are out of character, I really can't even fucking remember their personalities. And I'm too

lazy/busy as fuck to go looking it up. So uh.. just deal with it kay?

As usual forgive the typos, I think I got all the slashes (There were SOOOO many italics in this chapter. Dx) but if not then just correct them as italicized text in your mind. I love you all, and I apologize again for fucking with you so hard. xD I know you love me for it though... hopefully.

Anyway, please please PLEASSEE review this one. I spent so much time on it. I won't even ask for anything except reviews anymore.

See-ya next chapter; Chapter 5 - Frenemies.

# Frenemies

## Come What May

The world was twisting and turning, flying by with such speed he could hardly comprehend. Not that he even wanted to, right now he just wanted to escape. This was a disgusting situation, he didn't want to do it, down to the very pit of his detached stomach he wished with everything he had that the monsters would just drop him and let his head plummet down to the ground and smash on the concrete like a watermelon. Surely that would kill his immortal self.

If not... well.. let's not go there.

He tried so desperately to move. There were dark threads everywhere. He knew all too well that he was actually inside the body of these monsters, being protected and cradled like a newborn baby in a mother's womb, instead of a dismembered head in the belly of a fucking living mass of yarn.

Disgusting.

He wanted to bite, but he couldn't pry his lips apart with the fear that those nasty, moving, living threads might shoot inside his mouth like in some horror film. And the absolute last fucking thing he ever wanted to do in this immortal life was *taste* the hideous innards of Kakuzu. It didn't help that every time he thought about it an image of Hidan kissing that man with those little tentacles slipping their way into his mouth...

It was so unfair to still have the ability to gag but not to throw up.

*Note to self; do not EVER lose your body again.*

He clenched his eyes shut even harder, afraid to open them as well. If these stupid beasts moved any slower he was going to have to try

to sacrifice one of Kakuzu's hearts in a fucking month when they finally reached their destination.

That thought brought a small smile to his pursed lips. Sacrifice Kakuzu? Ohh, Jashin would get a kick out of that... And it would solve he and Hidan's dilemma too. Five hearts belonging to one man, did that give him five souls?

He almost forgot where he was while he imagined it, nearly opening his mouth to lick his lips. It was so enticing that he was actually considering it. Oh how wonderfully cruel that would be, act all friendly until he stitched him up and then, haha, he'd kill off the four hearts and beat him until he couldn't move and he'd torture him until he begged for mercy or death and then he'd give him over to Jashin.

*What's WRONG with you?*

What? Nothing's wrong. It would be fun to kill Kakuzu. That's all.

*Fun? Is that what you call that sadistic shit?*

Why am I having an argument with myself in my thoughts?

*You've lost it Shika.*

You're the one that's imaginary here...

Damn, He wanted to open his eyes. This was torture, having to sit here and wait patiently with nothing else to do, his thoughts were so strange, far worse than they'd been all day. Probably because he had no way to distract himself now. He could do nothing. This was just awful..

*Fine, fine. I'm not gonna kill him. It was just a thought.*

That would be a dick move. If the guy actually would let by-gones be by-gones and do him such a huge favor of piecing him back together, he should be trying to think of a way to thank him, not kill him.



Especially since I'm stealing Hidan from him... again...

*Wow.. I AM fucked up.*

He mentally sighed. This was too troublesome. He couldn't think clearly anymore. There were no fine lines with people anymore, it seemed. It used to be so easy, doing the right thing. He could read people so well. All it took was a glance to figure out what they were feeling, and he could tell them whatever they needed to hear.

There was no negativity, no blurred edges brought on by his hatred. The only man he'd loved back then was already his. He'd never known such vicious jealousy before, it made everything so goddamned difficult.

Damn that albino. Damn him so hard.

So what if they were fated to be together. Twenty two years he'd been reborn, and gone without him, happy as can be. Apparently Hidan hadn't done too badley for himself either. They could have gone on living just fine, except for some stupid chance of fate.

This could be Kakuzu's fault too. Why'd he have to choose *that* house? Why'd he have to choose *that* town. There were so many millions of other places they could go. Sure, they'd stopped in that area to figure out who was killing people, and somehow it had ended up being Hidan, which didn't really make sense unless he'd purposely started slaughtering and sacrificing people in that area just to get them to move over there so he could end up meeting Shikamaru and...

Wait...

Hah.. no. That was rediculous. Hidan didn't have any idea who he was either. He wasn't smart or convoluted enough for such things.

*But Jashin is.*

And 'Jashin is scary clever.'

Right, Neji was due to be sacrificed, it wasn't some chance thing that had happened. Maybe Hidan really had purposely started killing people and leaving the bodies lay where someone was bound to find them, attracting the Akatsuki's attention and forcing he and Kakuzu to relocate themselves to the area. And Oh look there just happened to be a house with a chamber directly across the street from where his target lived, how coincidental. It must've been some twisted ploy by Jashin. In fact if Shikamaru remembered correctly Neji had originally anted another house that ended up catching fire due to bad circuit wiring, and they'd settled for that one.

And of course Hiddan had been introuduced to Shikamaru through Neji, who was the great descendant of Hidan's master. Neji had moved to town in his teens, meaning he wasn't originally from there, meaning had his family not settled there, for whatever reason, they would have never met either.

*Did you have a hand in that too Jashin? You prick.*

Huh.. maybe his entire life had been planned out by the demon God. Maybe everything he did, every thought he had was influenced by the deity he didn't know owned his soul.

Why though? He still didn't understand why Jashin would go to all the trouble.

He was shaken from his thoughts, nearly gasping as everything jerked heavily and he was jolted back from his almost-nap. His eyes snapped open to reveal his vision completely blocked by writhing threads that made him think of staring into a snake-pit, and he quickly clenched them tightly shut again.

The threads vibrated, and making a soft moaning erupt all around him, nearly sending stars behind his eyelid with the volume of it, and then he felt himself moving, being pushed by the gross snake-like tendrils down until fresh air his his face. He basked in it, wishing he

had lungs to breathe it in. Oh thank Jashin, wherever the monsters were headed, they seemed to have arrived, and he could get out of that hellhole and get his body back-

Oh. Right. In order to get his body back Kakuzu had to stitch him up...

He opened his eyes, peeking at first. And when he was met with those damned evil christmas-colored eyes staring right back he nearly screamed. However, he managed to cover it rather nicely, Hidan-style.

"SON OF A BITCH!" He shouted, and the threads still holding him up twitched.

Kakuzu didn't react in the slightest.

"Holy fucking shit you scared the hell out of me... I thought I was screwed.." He said, instantly regretting it.

"Who says you aren't?" Came the deep, gravelly reply.

Unsure of how to reply to this, Shikamaru remained quiet, cautiously eyeing the man who only stared back with his usual unreadable expression. It dawned on Shikamaru that he wasn't wearing his mask, and somewhere in the back of his head he wondered why. But the more pertinent thought here was that he was just *staring*. Why didn't he say something? Hurry up and put him back together so that Shika could be on his fucking way and they wouldn't have to stay in each other's company for any longer than necessary. Then he could contact Pein again, tell him there's no way in hell he's working with Kakuzu, and have him send Itachi whenever he returned from whatever quest he was on.

"Where is Hidan?" Kakuzu asked, finally turning to study the bag of body parts his second thread minion was holding. Shikamaru blinked, not having even noticed that they separated again.

"I could ask you the same question."

"Don't play games with me *boy*. He's been gone for far too long, You're lucky I don't just kill you now."

Shikamaru forced his mouth to remain shut, pushing back his rage at this comment. Mostly because it was true, he was completley at Kakuzu's mercy here, damn it all.

"If you could... " He started, having to stop and grind his teeth before he could continue. Jashin Damn, he really didn't want to be in this situation.

Kakuzu raised a mocking eyebrow, revealing no other expression than interest, but still implying that he knew *exactly* what the novice Jashinist was going to say, and knew *exactly* how much he didn't want to say it.

*Just wait until your back is turned, motherfucker.*

No, no killing Kakuzu. Not until we find Hidan, at least.

"Dammit don't make me ask for help. You know I need it."

Surprisingly, the old man released the strangest noise at this, is Shikamaru weren't absolutly sure the bastard were incapable of joy he might think it to be some weird sort of laugh. He stared incredously at the once-again serious face of his nemises.

"It's terrible how much he's corrupted you." He said, finally grabbing the blood-soaked bag and turning to walk away. "Unfortunate for the entire world..."

Shikamaru's head started moving forward, and he could only assume that the threadmonster holding him was following. It was only just now that he noticed they'd been on a rooftop, and were now heading for the landing door. Just before he was about to enter, the

dark-skinned man whirled around, bringing his face uncomfortably close to Shikamaru, who was unable to do anything to squirm away.

"Listen closely though. I did not *rescue* you, it was a coincidence. I didn't take into account that you and Hidan's chakra signatures would be so much alike, you were mistaken for him, and that's the only reason that you're here right now."

He turned again, opening the door and starting down the stairwell. The monster holding Shikamaru followed yet again.

"And I'm not *helping* you either. I'm only going to do this because you're the only lead I have as to Hidan's whereabouts. I couldn't give less of a shit about your well-being."

The longest awkward silence ever in history followed this statement. Really, how was he supposed to respond to that? 'I don't fucking like you either but thanks for saving my fucking ass and sewing me back together, you stupid bitch.'

Yeah, that would keep him alive.

They turned a million times, trudging down the stairs at the monotonous pace of a sloth. Shikamaru had to literally bite his tongue to keep himself from protesting. He just wanted to get his body back, find Hidan, laugh in Kakuzu's face when he broke up with him, and then be on his way and get his life back in order. He didn't want to fucking dilly-dally around with this bastard and his mangled old bones while he put him back together like a living goddamn puzzle, probably just as fucking slowly as they were going down these stairs.

He was probably doing it on purpose, silently laughing up there ahead of him, taking his sweet time with his whole body that he had control of while the head of Shikamaru Nara lagged behind, wishing that blonde terrorist would just come bursting through the wall and blow him up so that he could escape this awful fucking situation.

... Huh.. It was weird that Deidara popped into his mind like that.

Actually no, not really. His head was acting pretty weird anyway. He should be used to random thoughts like such.

"Are you going to explain what happened?" Kakuzu finally said, his voice even deeper than usual in the echoey metal-and-stone stairwell.

"Why would I do that?"

"I was asking if you were going to or not, not asking you to do it."

"Why would you ask at all?"

"Your discomfort is infecting me, it's pissing me off. If you wish to talk then do it, I'm used to tuning annoying people out."

"Well maybe if you'd hurry up we could get this over with and be on our way."

"Have it your way."

Kakuzu waved his hand behind him, and a sense of dread overcame Shikamaru when the monster holding him started to convulse, somehow managing to still move slowly down the stairs.

Before he had time to do anything other than shout, the beast lurched to the side, diving over the rails and plummeting down, down, down, in the dangerously small space between each flight. He heard himself shouting, but could do nothing to stop it until the threads holding him landed heavily on the ground in a pile that kept his detached head safe from harm.

"I liked you better before, You were quiet and kept to yourself."

He would have jumped if he could at hearing Kakuzu so close. How the hell had he gotten down here so fast? And what kind of goddamn skyscraper were they in to have so many stairs!?

"You didn't have to give me a fucking heart attack!" He shouted, wishing more than anything he could will his hands to jump out of that bag and strangle the asshole.

"You didn't shout back then either. Your boyfriend did, but not you."

"Dammit would you just shut up and fix me please? This is awful."

Kakuzu stopped walking and turned to regard him with a stoic calmness that made Shikamaru's skin crawl.

"Hm. Fine. Let's get this over with." He pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside. By the time the minion followed, the lights had flickered on, and the Nara could have shit himself at what he saw.

It was a vault. A motherfucking giant vault door like the shit you see straight out of the movies.

"What the hell is this?" He shrilled, unable to take his eyes off the shining metal as he was laid gently on the floor by threaded hands.

"I don't do favors for free." Came Kakuzu's voice above loud footsteps and the disgusting sound of detached body parts hitting the floor in a heap.

"What the hell are you saying?"

"After I put you back together out of sheer generosity, you're going to go in there with that shadow-jump and repay me."

"It's not generosity if you force me to steal money from a fucking bank-vault for you!"

"Would you rather I leave you here in this condition?"

Silence dragged on as Shikamaru fought an inner war with himself. Obviously he couldn't decline. And really, if it were anyone other than this fucking scrooge he probably wouldn't mind. After all, he killed

people for a living, what more would robbing a bank do to his record?

But dammit, being more-or-less blackmailed into it, that was not only infuriating, but fucking insulting. It was bad enough that he was reduced to asking help of the guy he was going to completely screw over as soon as they found Hidan... *Really Jashin. Do you have to obliterate every moral I have?* But having to become an accomplice in a crime all because of his stupid greed just to get himself free of this dependancy? C'mon... it was just too much.

*You could just kill him.*

Yeah.. that would work. Did you not see what happened back at that van?

*Sacrifice his hearts.*

I'm talking to myself again...

*Kill him and give him to Jashin.*

"Fuck!" He said out loud, and the slightest crease edged at the corner of Kakuzu's mouth.

"That's what I thought. Now keep your trap shut so I can concentrate." He said, arranging something on the ground below Shikamaru's head that the immortal refused to even think about. He wanted to bitch and moan, to sling threats and tell the bastard to get his old nasty fucking hands off him, to quit touching what was mostly likely his bare flesh and ugh.. *Oh Jashin... just knock me out. I don't want to be concious...*

"I hate everything..." He muttered, staring up at the ceiling. Damn the anger, all it did was make it worse. And also helped him from feeling a crippling depression that had him nearly bursting into tears, the only thing he actually *could* do.



"You complained just as much.." Kakuzu muttered in return.

"Do you have to have a smartass comeback for everything? Jashin, at least with Hidan you can laugh at his stupidity. You're just a bastard."

"Might I remind you of your predicament?"

"Yeah, trust me. It's kind of hard to forget that you're nothing but a goddamn head."

"The sooner you're quiet, the faster I can work. Your skin is burned everywhere, the edges are frayed and it's rather difficult."

"Great. So you're going to hold me hostage here until I've recovered enough to break into this vault."

Kakuzu paused his movement. And Shikamaru couldn't even enjoy the perplexed silence.

"All my chakra is going to be sucked dry while I recover from this shit. The jutsu you want me to use requires a big chunk. I can't do it right away. It'll be a few hours at the least."

The elder man returned to his task, letting the silence drag on.

"I'd think someone who's lived with Hidan so long would know that."

"Shut up." Came the pert reply, and a stab of pain shot briefly up his neck. He hissed through his teeth, but otherwise managed not to continue letting his mouth run.

Yeah, he probably was being unreasonable annoying, but talking was all he could do. If Hidan had ever been in this situation (And he undoubtedly had after two hundred years) he could sort of understand why the man was always so loud and obnoxious. It was a horrible feeling, being utterly helpless. Humiliating, shameful, depressing, infuriating, it was every negative emotion swirling around together in a hurricane headed down bullshit avenue.

Dear Jashin... how had it come to this?

*Because someone blabbed your secret.*

Right. That man, Kimimaro, he'd said Juugo was working with him. Which could lead him to logically believe that maybe those girls and the man had been too.

But the only distinction he could tell was that the first bunch had been Jashinists... maybe they all were? Kimimaro had been saying something about someone needed all the pieces, needing Shikamaru intact. He'd referenced someone else, which meant they were working for someone... but who?

"Hidan's been captured..." He said quietly. As much as he despised Kakuzu, they shared a common goal. And in all honesty he probably was better suited to the job of tracking down the zealot than Itachi. It was a blessing as much as a curse that he would show up.

Again the elder man paused his work to look up to Shikamaru, silently asking him to explain.

"They were trying to get me too. That's... how this happened. I escaped their attempts twice before, I guess they finally got tired of messing around and decided to get serious."

"And why do you think Hidan has been taken prisoner?"

"Well, for one, because you're here looking for him. Last I saw of him he was heading back to you." Shikamaru said, trying to sound bitter so as to not reveal exactly *why* the man who had become a rope in a game of tug-of-war was going back.

"So he was here then." Kakuzu said, before Shikamaru yelped at a sharp sting in his leg.

"I thought that would be obvious seeing as I'm still alive..." He trailed off, realizing the fact that he'd actually felt pain in a body part besides

his head. Relief and partial excitement poured through him, pushing him to attempt to sit up to look at his reattached body. 'Attempt' being the key word. As soon as he made any movement at all thousands of needles and threads tugged at various parts of his skin, forcing a choking sound from his throat and making him go stiff from the pain. Mercifully, a tanned hand shoved him roughly back onto the ground where he stared wide-eyed at the dark stainless steel ceiling, jaw clenched to prevent him from screaming.

"I haven't even gotten your organs back in idiot. Stay still." Kakuzu's voice growled distantly behind the ringing in his ears.

"God forbid I ever have to put up with two of you idiots at the same time..." He mumbled shortly after.

*Did he just say God?*

Tch, no. This man's as atheist as it gets.

*He said God.*

It's just a saying.

***Kill him.***

STOP IT!

"S-sorry.." The Nara rasped to escape the persistently increasing conversations in his head. He really needed to visit a therapist. Would medication work on an immortal?

"Who was it?" He was asked, bringing him back to reality.

"What?"

"Who was it that blew you apart?" The elder said quickly, irritation creasing his brow.

"I don't know... I thought at first it was other Jashinists, maybe trying keep us contained, prevent anyone else from being immortalized. But I'm not sure that's right anymore."

"Why not?" Kakuzu said, having to hold Shikamaru down when whatever he was doing sent another jolt of agony through his battered body.

"Because. It doesn't make sense. If they wanted to stop it then they would just kill us. I'm sure they know how."

"They don't."

The immortal grimaced through a flex of his fingers. It hurt like hell, but just being able to feel them move was fully worth the pain. Frankly, it was amazing that his nerves and muscles had already healed well enough in this tiny amount of time for him to do anything at all.

"Why do you say that?"

"Have you forgotten why Hidan reappeared in your life again?"

Oh, right. Everyone had thought the man dead when he went missing for over a year, when it turned out he was held captive by Jashinists those 6 months ago... it would make sense that he would know what they were capable of. Surely he had overheard quite a few conversations in such a length of time.

"If they knew how to kill you, they would know how to acquire what they were after, and they wouldn't have tried to use me to get it."

Yeah... that made sense. But at the same time sent everything else back to its previous state. Like he was working so hard on a jigsaw puzzle, but had to go on a scavenger hunt to find the pieces. And it didn't help that he had people trying to kidnap him constantly riding his ass either.

"So you think I'm on the right track?"

"I'm only collecting data. I couldn't care less about your opinion."

Kakuzu said naturally, causing a flare of anger that made Shikamaru grind his teeth. Thankfully though, the man posing as his surgeon finally stood up. The minion still standing behind him opened its mask mouth with a loud crack, and the edge of some sort of fabric stuck out, almost like a tongue. Tanned hands of the man he hated but unfortunately owed his life to latched onto it and yanked it out, tossing it down onto Shikamaru where it draped over his thighs and sensitive area above them.

The Jashinist kept quiet, overcome by the humiliation of the thought that just occurred to him.

Dear Jashin... Kakuzu had not only seen but had to reattach his man-parts.

*No... really Jashin. If you could just kill me... that'd be great.*

Kakuzu's echoey footsteps trailed off, and the younger, no longer bodiless man was slightly disheartened to realize he wanted to call out and ask where he was going. He hated the guy, yes. But that didn't mean he wanted to be left alone at the door of a vault, unable to move his only recently repaired body. He wouldn't put it past the old bastard to do something like that either.

Greedy son of a bitch, if it weren't for Hidan's influence in the situation he wouldn't be surprised if the money-grubbing asshole didn't just abandon him after they got the money out of here.

This thought made the Nara impatient. Dammit, he'd been laying here helpless long enough. He wanted to get up and move, act on his own and have his body respond to him. It really couldn't have been more than an hour or two since he'd been ripped to shreds. But with everything that had occurred within that small time-frame, it felt like an eternity.

He could already feel the chakra that had only recently started trickling back through him rushing to repair the damage. If he could get himself to be angry enough he could probably be good as new in the next ten minutes. However, as uncomfortable as the situation was, he didn't feel anger. No as long as Kakuzu wasn't sitting there spitting out his fucking smartass replies and asking his stupid questions for 'data collection'. What a tool.

Again Shikamaru flexed his fingers, and a grin stretched it was across his face when he only felt the tug of the stitching and miniscule prickles of pain.

He wiggled the digits on the other hand, nearly laughing out loud at the sensation of being in control of his body again.

Maybe he would heal faster than he thought...

"Hey..." He called out, making a face when he didn't receive a reply. "HEY! How long did it take Hidan to recover from something like this?" If he'd ever needed to, that is. Surely he'd been blown to smithereens once or twice in the couple centuries he's been alive. Even if Kakuzu's only been around for not quite one, and there was no telling how much of that time they'd known each other.

Still silence, where the hell did he go?

Taking a deep breath, he rolled his head to the side, wincing when his neck stitches pained him, but still feeling successful at the small movement.

Aside from the threadmonster sitting eerily motionless beside him, there was nothing to see. A stainless steel wall that towered up to the twenty-foot ceiling, and the edge of the vault door itself.

He focused instead on Kakuzu's mask waiting patiently beside him like a guard dog. At least he knew the old man hadn't run off if his puppet was still here...

"Hey.. monster-thing. Psst!" He said to it, getting ignored just as he'd expected.

Shikamaru sighed, time was dragging on. He needed to be back on his feet, he needed to go find Hidan and rescue him so he could beat the shit out of him for getting caught and then hold him down and kiss him into oblivion. After the zealot broke up with Kakuzu that is. Or maybe before. He honestly didn't really fucking care either way... All he knew is he missed that loud-mouthed, vulgar, brainless oaf like crazy all the sudden. Sitting here in this dumb room with this dumb creature beside him, unable to move or do anything other than talk, and the only other animate being with him wouldn't say a damn word. It was like torture. He'd give anything to have Hidan beside him, he didn't care if the man was pissed off and going off on some rant or just making fun of him for the humiliating scenario that had just occurred... He just missed him...

"Can you move yet?" Came that familiar deep, graveley voice, accompanied by increasingly loud footfalls.

*Oh thank Jashin he's back.*

Don't thank anyone, you hate him.

*Oh just shut up.*

"Kind of. I haven't tried very much."

"At least try putting those pants on, I'm tired of seeing that pathetic thing."

Shikamaru's jaw fell open. Did he seriously just insult his dick? And also, those were pants he tossed on him? Awe, how fucking considerate to make him clothes from his nasty threads... fucking shiteater.

"Don't be fucking jealous just because it's not old and wrinkley." The younger growled, doing his best to lift himself and pretend like it

didn't feel like a thousand little knives stabbing into him over and over at every single tiny movement.

*Embrace the pain. Embrace it. Wrap it around you like a blanket.*

Fuck this hurts.

*You're not even trying.*

"The maturity of that retort is breathtaking."

"Hey you started it, bastard."

"As was that one."

"You-Guh- Just shut up! Damn. I don't know how he puts up with you."

"How *he* puts up with *me* ? You're confused, boy."

"No. You're ridiculous. Way more arrogant than Hidan has *ever* been, at least he doesn't try to be something he's not. 'I'm so old and wise and everyone else is immature and stupid.' It's a load of shit. What kind of wise old man makes cracks about gentalia?"

Kakuzu was suddenly next to him, multicolored eyes glaring so hard that Shikamaru thought he might burst into flames... again.

"Watch what you say. You're still at my mercy."

"That's what you think." Shikamaru said, glaring right back.

The elder's eyes widened only slightly before narrowing again, and Shika couldn't help the sneer that stretched across him. He had Kakuzu stuck in Shadow possession, along with his little minion too. It had been ridiculously easy, actually. The light reflected so well off the walls in here that there were literally a thousand little almost invisible shadows on each figure in the room. Combine them all and manipulate and what resulted was something even stronger than his



original jutsu, seeing as Shikamaru was holding them from every single angle.

"I really don't understand what it is that makes people underestimate me... but I guess it's an asset.." He muttered to the captive man, who's expression showed his increasing anger.

"Release the jutsu or I'm going to tear you apart again and scatter you across the world."

"Quit making threats and treating me like shit and I'd be happy to."

"You will get respect when you have earned it."

"I KICKED YOUR ASS ONCE OLD MAN, I CAN DO IT AGAIN!"

"You owe me a dept, boy. It increases each time you irritate me."

"I never said I wasn't going to get you your stupid money..." He said, releasing the jutsu. Not because Kakuzu requested it, but because he was getting lightheaded trying to hold it and continue repairing himself at the same time.

"Quit lording it over my head. I'm fucking grateful alright? It would be a hell of a lot easier to say 'thank you' if you weren't such a dick. Seriously..."

The man wasn't moving, simply looking back and forth between Shikamaru's eyes with his own slightly narrowed. Finally he Hmph'd and stood up.

Shikamaru averted his gaze when the stitches on his back opened up and the thread minion behind him dove inside in a disgusting display. "Put on your clothes and let's go. "

Shikamaru looked back at him quizzically. "Go?"

Instead of replying, Kakuzu only turned and headed back out into the room where the stairs started.

"Hey wait!" The Jashinist said, gritting his teeth and struggling to move quickly as he tried to frantically put on pants and get up at the same time.

Damn these stitches fucking hurt.

"I thought you wanted me to-"

"I've decided to hang on to the favor you owe me. This was just a convenient place to operate, no interruptions."

Shikamaru was swept with a dizzying combination of relief and horror. And he was greeted with a tightness in his chest he both relished and hated. He was *saving* his favor? Wait a second, He'd never even been granted one, Shika was only going to rob the stupid bank because Kakuzu threatened not to put him back together. And that was null and void now. And even more disturbing than that, is the bastard held on to it then at any given moment the Nara might have to throw himself into a horrible situation on his request. Even though he didn't technically *have* to. This was all a matter of keeping one's word.

He sighed heavily and grunted as he pushed himself to his feet, focusing on breathing evenly to distract himself from the violent protesting of his legs.

A Jashinist never breaks their word... goddamit.

This could seriously, *seriously* complicate things. And complexity was the absolute last fucking thing the recipe of his life called for, even though it continued to be kneaded in relentlessly.

He hobbled along, coming to a stop at the base of the stairs and staring up at the billions of flights with an expression that was probably similiar to that of a sad puppy. "There's no way in hell I can do this..." He said, and Kakuzu's face poked over the railing three stories up, brow raised in both question and mock.

"My fuckin' legs are gonna fall off!"

"Sounds like an unfortunate situation for you." He replied, continueing up the stairs.

"Are you kidding me right now!?" Shikamaru whined, more to himself than the older man.

"Do I come off as someone who makes jokes?"

The ragdoll of a man remained quiet, glaring up the staircase. Maybe he *would* kill the bastard, not only would it end the unneccesary torture, it would free him of this stupid 'favor' situation, which could be used horribly against him. Especially if they found Hidan, the zealot tried to leave him, and he did something stupid like order him to tell the love of his life to fuck off.

He definitely would kill him then, or die trying. Despite repeatedly being put in these awful situations because of the maniac who stole his heart, he would never make the mistake of letting him get away again.

He clicked his tongue, closing his eyes and putting his first two fingers to his lips. If Kakuzu could use his minions to carry Shikamaru around, he could make his own shadowbeasts to help him out when he needed it. Up until now he'd only make small little twig-like ones, but surely it couldn't be that hard. The only thing stopping him might be the lack of chakra, though maybe the excess of shadows would help make up for it.

He imagined it clearly in his mind, just make a big lunger, something spider-like to just carry him up quickly and efficiently, so he could flip Kakuzu the bird as he went by. Concentrate the chakra in the shadows, feel them around you, swarming at your feet, and mold the energy into an animate object. Easy stuff, he could do this.

Until the wall exploded. That made things rather difficult.

The half-created blob of shadow instead lurched in front of him, successfully turning itself into a shield to keep him from having to be part of two detonated buildings in one day. He let out a swear, (or maybe that was his temporary partner up above, he wasn't exactly sure in all the mayhem) and threw an arm over his face.

*You can't be serious. They can't be back already.*

He couldn't fight in this condition. He was still stiff, and every movement sent little slices of pain throughout him. Dammit, he was going to have to depend on Kakuzu to protect him. FUCK! Just... just fuck. Fuck everything! Why could he get a goddamn break.

No, wait. This is okay, he needed to be angry, this was the perfect fuel. Once he was pissed enough he would start healing almost instantly, and if he could get some of their blood in his mouth, even fucking better.

"Bring it on you bastards! I'll kill all of you!" He shouted, unlocking his knees and semi-squatting with his hands clamped together. He was going to bitch slap these guys with every last ounce of chakra he could spare.

But he didn't have the chance. He barely even saw the strings as they flew in through the still smoking hole in the the wall and attached to him at various places. He voiced his confusion aloud and attempted to tear himself free before the strings snapped tight, glimmering a faint blue. His eyes widened, he'd seen these before... where was it? This was someone's jutsu and he knew who it was... but was it a friend or enemy.

Before he could come to a conclusion his body moved on it's own, making him nearly roar in pain as he was forced to run forward, out of the hole through the ridiculously thick concrete layered on each side with metal. Holy shit, whoever managed to blow a hole through this was either insane or the best damn explosives expert ever.

"Goddamit!" he snarled, coming to a stop outside only for the fact that none other than Kakuzu rushed to the rescue, his arm turning black and glowing the same smoggy color while he used it to cut through the strings. It was only a momentary victory, as Shikamaru was suddenly snatched from behind and hauled upward so fast that he thought his stomach might fall right back out of his body.

He almost wanted to laugh at the annoyed expression on Kakuzu's face as he got smaller and smaller, and then he really did laugh when a white blur raced by, disrupting his vision of the man and apparently dropping a handful of bombs down onto him at the same time. The ground around where the elder man had been standing erupted into fire and sound, and Shikamaru still couldn't stop himself from chuckling.

He was flung upward into the air and sent into a flailing plummet back down after the slow motion crescent in the air. Jovialty gone, he made a frantic note to at the very least draw the summoning symbol for his scythe on his hand, seeing as the glove had been turned to ash in the explosion. Having the stolen weapon would be really nice right about now, seeing as he was about to fall to his doom and his stitches surely would not hold through the impact.

*Dammit. Can't catch a single fucking break.*

Stop it, you need to focus, you're under attack.

*And dipshit is defending you, which is degrading.*

These voices needed to stop. Like Now.

Okay, think.. right, just make a shadow extension and grab onto the building. You can run off while Kakuzu is busy fighting, then you won't have to deal with him and you'll avoid the battle.

Cowardly?

Yes.

Did he care?

*Not one damn bit.*

He focused his precious little trickle of chakra, wondering why the hell it was so hard to get angry here recently. He could whoop these guys and Kakuzu alike if he could just get a little pissed.

He reached out with his three dimensional octopus hand, grasping for anything. He couldn't make it long enough, he didn't have enough chakra. He'd wasted it all on the spider that had turned to a sheild.

The ground was coming, and he gritted his teeth.

*This is going to fucking hurt.*

The white blur caught his eye just before he realized it was coming straight at him. And his eyes widened, mind finally jumping to action just before he would have fallen straight on top of it. He slug his arm back and cracked it like a whip, slicing what he suddenly recognized to be some cartooney version of a falcon right in two. The person who'd been previously on top of it shouted and leaped off.

It looked like a woman, dammit. He didn't want to have to kill another girl, especially not a blonde. Whoever it was sailed toward him in the air almost like a cat pouncing.

Oh shit, he was still falling.

A body smalled into his, pushing him backward on single flip until his back inexplicably pressed into something soft. His inertia suddenly changed directions completley and his stomache actually physically rolled inside him. He silenetly cursed Kakuzu while he clutched at his gut, opening his eyes after a millisecond when he remembered what was happening, and then yelping when for a brief second he met a pair of bright blue iris's right before a fist collided with his cheek.

His neck cracked sickly when his head jerked to the side from the impact, and he groaned from the nauseating pain from not only the punch but the lingering effects of having his stomach shift inside him.

"You fucking idiot! What do you think you're doing attack me, hm? Just saved your ass!"

That... that was most certainly not a woman's voice..

He opened his eyes, still staring out sideways in his half fetal position as the earth around him zoomed past. He was flying, on a big soft white thing..

"Sasori! I got him! Let's go yeah?" The horribly un-feminine voice shouted from beyond his viewing range.

*Sasori... isn't that..*

Wait a second here...

Hah.

HahahaHAHAHA! No way!

He sat up, his inner laugh working its way into an actual one as he stared at a very confused drag-queen.

"Deidara? What the fuck are you doing here?" he chuckled, still unable to stop himself. He hadn't seen this guy in nearly three years. And now he randomly shows up out of the blue claiming to have saved his ass. Who the hell had he saved his ass from? It was his fault he'd been falling hundreds of feet in the first place.

Oh no, that had been those chakra strings that caught him and threw him into the air.

OH YEAH! He'd thought those strings had looked familiar. He'd never even seen the redhead use them but for that brief interrogation

they had with Sasuke. Sasori was his name... Damn, he hadn't seen these two in years, he'd actually completely forgotten about them. And why it tickled him so much for them to be here was quite honestly beyond him.

No wait, it made perfect sense why it was so hilarious. It was because they'd attacked Kakuzu.

... Why were they attacking Kakuzu?

"What're you doing?" He called out to the blonde, who snapped his head back to glare at him.

"The boss sent us to help you out, hm. Seeing as we're the only people left in the Akatsuki that doesn't take a damn vacation every other day."

"No I mean why are you attacking Kakuzu?"

"Kakuzu?"

"Yeah. Kakuzu."

*If I hear his name one more damn time...*

"Is that who's down there?"

"Uh, yeah. Go look."

"Are you sure, hm?"

"YESS that's him goddammit!"

After leaning back over the bird to glare down for a minute, the blonde let out a string of profanities and made some combinations of hand signs. He twisted around and pointed to Shikamaru, then at the bird-mount in an obvious order to stay put. Then he turned and leaped off.



The Nara stared blankly for a moment, blinking. The white bird he was sitting on, that he now realized was clay, began turning in a slow circle like a vulture, high above the chaos down below. He rolled onto his stomach, digging his fingers into the sculpture to look over the side. There was a peaceful kind of serenity he felt sitting up here and watching the smoke plume up. Being able to watch from a distance the insanity that he was usually involved in directly was nice for a change.

As bizarre as all of this was, He couldn't help but find this strange sort of humor in the situation. Everyone claimed to hate Hidan, and yet whenever he went missing all hell broke loose...

A/N-

Alright. Blah. Wow, I'm really sorry if this chapter's kind of like... dumb. I don't know.

I try really hard guys, like I use every second of my spare time to write, but I usually still only end up getting like an hour a day, and that's if I'm lucky. The downside to this is that my mood and mindset change from day to day so each damn time I have to try to get back into the same thought process and occasionally I fail miserably at this.

So if this one is a little all over the place, forgive me. I don't know why I'm struggling so hard with this.

As always, reviews are loved.

OH! Almost forgot again. Shika in ritual is up on my deviantart now. That one and the one I did of him with his new scythe and whatnot have both been put into a HidaShika group gallery xD! Made me so happy when I saw that request.

Anyways, love you guys, see ya next chappie!

# Burning Bridges

## Come What May

Bright blue eyes stared into his own glaring ones as he slipped another chip into his mouth.

A bunch of ex-criminals capable of running the country if they wanted to and all they had to eat was a bag of chips.

Fuckin' ridiculous.

"What the hell are you staring at?" He finally said.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, hn." The blond retorted, making Shikamaru accidentally crush his handful of chips in anger. This only irritated him further.

This whole situation was just stupid. A largescale fight had erupted after Shikamaru's 'rescue', when Deidara and Sasori mistakenly attacked Kakuzu thinking he was the person who their boss claimed was trying to kidnap Shikamaru. That scene had been rather funny if he could say so himself.

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He stared down at the continueing battle, unsure really of what emotion he was feeling. There were a lot of things to consider here that he'd realized all at once. The first being that Deidara claimed Nagato hsd sent them, and that meant he had not sent Kakuzu. This should have been obvious right away, given the elder man's behavior, but at the same time the Nara was rather occupied with getting his body back.

And if Kakuzu had not been sent, then repairing Shikamaru really *had* been a favor that he was now apparently obligated to return.

The second bit that actually confused him more than anything was that somehow, even though Kakuzu had stated that Shikamaru's chakra had changed to closely resemble Hidan's, Deidara and Sasori somehow managed to find him and recognize that it was him, but they hadn't been able to tell that Kakuzu wasn't an enemy.

He watched the battle below, unable to wipe the smirk from his face despite the dwindling joy he felt due to the bizarre situation. He listened to the unintelligible shouting back and forth of Blondie and the Red-head, trying to determine exactly why they wouldn't know it was him. For a moment he considered the possibility that it wasn't him. He didn't really know the guy well enough to tell if he was acting strange or not, but he was definitely being as much of a douche as usual, maybe slightly nicer than last time they'd met, but still insufferable all the same. But if he were trying to cause harm he certainly wouldn't have helped him out so much.

The explosions stopped finally, and Shikamaru stared down the hundreds of feet below him as he waited for the smoke to clear. He could hear sirens, and of course there was a large crowd gathering around the large bank in what was actually a rather large city. He absently sighed, Kakuzu could be just as dumb as Hidan, it seemed.

No, it was Deidara that had blown a hole in the wall... He wasn't all that intelligent either if he recalled correctly, possibly even dumber than the original immortal himself.

There were four little figures down below, and when he squinted he could kinda-sorta make out the three Akatsuki members, the fourth he was baffled about until he discovered later it had actually been some sort of battle puppet, as ridiculous as that sounded. That was Sasori's specialty, puppeteering. That's what his little chakra strings were about. Honestly, Shikamaru thought that to be kind of lame, but who was he to judge?

They stood around for awhile, talking presumably, as Shikamaru fidgeted up above. If they didn't hurry the hell up then the authorities were going to get involved and the situation would get even messier

and more confusing, and if that happened Shikamaru was definitely going to blow a gasket.

Finally, just as he was getting ready to leap off and hope someone caught him before he slapped down onto the ground and tore himself apart again, the bird swooped suddenly downward, slowing down only long enough for the three uncomfortably silent ex-criminals to hop on board before rocketing off into the night and away from the crime scene.

---

"You really don't have any idea why it's changed so drastically?" Sasori said to Kakuzu beside him, not trying to hide the fact that he was blatantly ignoring not only Shikamaru, but Deidara as well.

Kakuzu shook his head, face revealing absolutely nothing as usual.

"So what the hell is this hm? Are you the freak spawn of those zombies or what?" The blonde said, gesturing to Shikamaru's stitched up body.

"You should be careful how you talk to me. I'm not exactly in a good mood." He crunched into another chip after that, refusing to break eye contact. Luckily he wasn't trying to be threatening, or he would have failed miserably. At the moment he was just trying to stay awake until they arrived at whatever safe place they were headed. Then he was going to sleep until he couldn't anymore. Or at least until another non-nightmare woke him up.

"What're you gonna do hm? *Sacrifice* me? I heard you joined that psychos cult. Honestly I thought you were smarter than that, gave you too much credit yeah?"

"This will be the second warning." Shikamaru said almost boredly.  
"Watch your mouth."

"Just shut up brat. Don't make this any worse than it needs to be." Sasori finally intervened.

"It's never a wise decision to engage an enemy when you don't know what they're capable of." Kakuzu added, making Shikamaru freeze in the middle of stuffing another chip in his mouth.

Did Kakuzu just haphazardly compliment him?

*Of course not. He's your enemy.*

When did we decide he was an enemy?

*He stole Hidan from you.*

***He needs to die.***

He turned to peek at the older man from the corner of his eye. Kakuzu was sitting with his arms and legs crossed, his head was slightly bowed and his eyes were shut, almost as if meditating.

"I know what he's capable of, hn, I fought him before remember?"

"And I beat the shit out of you."

"Look at his chakra you idiot. He's not the same, and if he were anything but stronger he'd be dead."

"I beat Kakuzu's ass too..."

The two paused long enough to look at the older man, who remained statuesque and silent, before looking back to Shikamaru.

"Yeah right. Sasori can barely hold his own against him. You're making it up, hm."

"Nope, it happened." He said, looking out at the clouds they soared over and below. "It probably was a fluke though. It was right after he came back from the dead. He was at a disadvantage. A big one..."

"I engaged an enemy without knowing their abilities." Kakuzu said, nearly making Shikamaru jump when he turned back to find the older

man studying him.

He stared cautiously for a moment, tearing his own gaze away and shifting uncomfortably when the stitched up man refused to do so.

*Kill him, right now.*

Stop it.

"Yeah well... regardless. We've all improved since we last saw each other. I want a rematch, yeah?" Deidara said, his almost cheerful voice contrasting greatly from the suspicious glances he was giving them both.

Sasori's hand raised threateningly for a moment before the blonde caught sight of it and quickly changed the subject.

"But that's for another time, so what's the story with... this... hm?" He said, again gesturing to Shikamaru's battered appearance, who sighed heavily and finished off the bag of chips. A vague image of his old best friend flickered through his mind briefly at the act. Choji was always munching on chips...

"I really don't feel like explaining. I've told this to like six different people already..." he exaggerated with a whine.

"We do need to know what's going on." Sasori said calmly, staring robotically at him. "Nagato gave us only the instructions to locate and rescue you, and assist in finding Hidan."

"So the basic question here is what the hell did that idiot get himself into this time, and why should I care hm?"

"Would you just shut your mouth, brat. Honestly you're no better than him sometimes." Sasori snapped.

"Agreed." Kakuzu added.

"Hey can we stop shit talking Hidan maybe?" Shika interrupted.

"Oh right, I forgot you two had a thing hm. I won so much money from that bet."

"A bet?"

"Yeah Kisame started a pool to see who Hidan would choose."

"WHAT!?"

"Must be freaking awkward to sit there next to each other huh?"

"You guys fucking gambled on our love lives?"

"Kakuzu made the most, yeah."

"YOU!?"

The older man shrugged nonchalantly while Deidara chuckled like mad and the novice jashinist stared around at all of them like they were madmen.

*They are insane. They're Akatsuki after all.*

Yeah, and I'd fit right in with these voices in my head.

"I..wha.. Are you fucking serious right now?"

"Unfortunatley they are. Bunch of children.." Sasori sighed, pulling his sleeve up and making the Nara's jaw drop open when he opened a compartment in his flesh-colored *wooden* arm and pulled out a rolled up piece of paper.

Deidara only cackled harder upon noticing Shikamaru's gawking.

He was trying to determine whether the Red-head had a prosthetic arm or if his whole body was like that, trying to get it through his head that the most heart-wrenching time of his life had been taken so light-heartedly by his only somewhat friends that they'd actually turned it into a fucking gamble. He was trying to understand what the

fuck was even happening right now, what would happen next, and doing his best not to rip his hair out.

He took a deep breath. He needed meditation, is what he needed. He and Jashin needed to have a chat, something to calm his nerves and anchor him back down to reality. Something to stabilize his world and help things to start making sense again.

He needed... well. He needed Hidan back. Maybe it didn't make sense at all, but he suddenly came to the conclusion that as long as Hidan was around, things made sense. Up was up and down was down and even when it wasn't it was still okay because he had the logic of the psycho to help him through it.

Trying to make sense on an illogical situation with two sensible, grounded people and an idiot terrorist was just not working out.

"We're getting close." He finally said, rolling what Shikamaru assumed must have been a map back up and stuffing it back into his arm compartment.

"Close to where?" He asked, unable to mask his mental and physical exhaustion.

"Where we'll be staying. A safehouse. You and Kakuzu both need rest judging by your appearance alone. Your chaotic chakra supports this as well."

"I'm healing..." Shika explained weakly. "It probably does look wierd, that'll happen when you get blown to bits."

"You actually survived being in the middle of a largescale explosion?" Deidara said, back to his serious-but-not-serios demeanor. "One that ripped you apart!? That's insane! So you and the moron really are unkillable hm!"

"It explains the stitches as well. How convenient for Kakuzu to stumble upon you. If we'd found you like that... well you'd probably



be in even worse condition."

"He was in the middle of getting himself kidnapped as well." Kakuzu finally spoke up, turning slightly to a glowering Shikamaru. "He's lucky I don't hold onto that favor as well."

"Kidnapped?" Sasori questioned, holding his hand up to signal silence when Deidara opened his mouth most likely to make some stupid wisecrack.

The man beside the immortal remained silent now, and again Shikamaru sighed. Damn that bastard, he'd coaxed them into asking what happened again even though he'd plainly said he didn't want to talk about it.

"Okay. Fine." He said, balancing between irritation and full on anger. "How up to date are you two on Hidan and I?"

"Not very." The puppeteer said, again holding up his hand for silence when his blonde partner opened his mouth. "Seeing as we haven't seen any of the three of you in nearly three years. We only know what we've heard through gossip?"

"Gossip?" Shikamaru said, raising a brow through a bored expression.

"Yes. You two were a hot topic there for awhile. Konan, Kisame, and this brat and this brat wouldn't shut up about it."

"HEY! I was only making fun of them yeah?"

"Oh please, you were like a teenage girl."

"SASORI QUIT TELLING THEM THAT?"

"Are you embarrassed? Perhaps you shouldn't behave that way then."

"Uh, hey guys." Shikamaru said, snapping his finger and inwardly laughing. Kisame was right, these two were so far in the closet they were finding Christmas presents. "Let's stick to the topic." He eyed them both, doing his best not to look like he was teasing. Dei was turning slightly red in his scowling face, and Sasori continued to stare emotionlessly. In fact, Shikamaru hadn't seen his expression change at all.

"Okay. Here's the summary." He said quickly, flicking his gaze to Kakuzu. He really didn't want to have to explain how he and Hidan had a relationship in front of the man yet again, but the man made no movement or noise whatsoever, so he continued.

"Two years after that fiasco in that little town Hidan came back from the dead and tried to kill me. Turns out he was actually still after Neji but he'd broken up with me and left 6 months before that. I guess he stalked me for awhile, but obviously I didn't know it was him. So to draw him out I accidentally devoted my soul to Jashin and then after I beat the shit out of him I made him swear his loyalty to me so he wouldn't go after Neji and-"

"Whoa, wait. How do you *accidentally* sell your soul to an imaginary God hm?" Deidara interrupts, holding up his hands in a 'time-out' symbol.

"It just fucking happened okay!? And obviously he's not fucking fake if I just survived being blown up. Just shut up and let me finish." He said, glaring and resisting the urge to just shove the drag-queen off his bird and escape his smartass comments.

"Long story short, and this is top secret alright? No one says a word. But anyway, we ended up creating this never-before-done ritual. It's originally called a blood bond, where one Jashinist basically leeches the powers of the other and then kills them in order to become stronger. Through that I inherited some of Hidan's immortality, and he got my jutsu you know, vice-versa." He said, gauging the two's reaction. Sasori didn't make one unsurprisingly, and Deidara seemed somewhere between grossed out and cautiously interested.

"One of the drawbacks to this is that he has to hunt me down and 'sacrifice' me twice a year so we can both stay alive. He came here to do that, and after he left I've been being harrassed by people that I'm not even entirely sure *what* their affiliation is, but they've been trying to kidnap me. The only thing I can assume is that someone let out our condition and now everyone wants a piece of it. I'm 90 percent sure whoever it is managed to capture Hidan, and they damn near got me too." He snuck a quick glance at Kakuzu, who gave an almost un-noticable nod. "He came looking for Hidan, and mistakenly got me. I guess our chakra's have become almost identical, probably due to the whole 'sharing each others abilities' situation."

"Nagato informed us of this. It's the only reason we were able to identify you." Sasori stated calmly. "So this is a rescue mission then?"

"Uh.. yeah, basically.."

"Oh that's fucking great, yeah?" Deidara said loudly, throwing his hands up. "You two zombie idiots get yourself into more trouble than a freaking mouse in a snakepit, you know? I swear Sasori and I are the only ones in this organization that can get a job done decently."

"Quit whining, brat."

"No! This is ridiculous! You two dissapeared out into your little secluded cabin in the woods," he said, gesturing to Kakuzu, "And we've had to pick up all your slack, hm. Fucking Itachi keeps having to take his little vacations to check on his brother and babysit the psycho, and every time he does that it turns into some sort of calamity. Your fault, by the way." He growls the last at Shikamaru, pointing an accusing finger at him. "We're doing everyone's work! I haven't had a decent rest in forever! Why can't you two go rescue him yourselves, since you're such a 'badass' now, yeah?"

"We've been given an order and we're going to follow it, Deidara. Shut. Up." Sasori said, raising his hand threateningly.

"Hey!" Shikamaru shouted back. He was sick of hearing Barbie's voice. "You think I *wanted* all this shit to happen? I'm just as fucking pissed off about it as you are! You have no fucking clue all the bullshit I keep having to go through because of that maniac!?"

"Well why the hell did you get involved with him in the first place hm!?"

"I HAD NO CHOICE!"

"You could've just killed him when he showed back up. Kakuzu wouldn't have been there to bail his ass out and I wouldn't be here looking at your stupid face! Hm!"

"It's not that simple. There was literally nothing else I could do! It's none of your goddamn business anyway! Shut your goddamn hole before I shut it for you!"

"Oh you think you can hm?"

"You wanna fucking find out!?"

"Bring it on you ragdoll zombie freak!"

The two were quickly hushed by respectedly hard slaps to their cheeks. Shikamaru's in particular nearly knocked him off their mount, and this of course did nothing to calm his flared temper.

"Both of you shut up!" kakuzu growled, glaring daggers right back at the Nara.

"Honestly It's like Hidan never left..." Sasori muttered, twisting his wrist until it clicked back into a normal position.

"No kidding..." Deidara said, rubbing his quickly reddening cheek. "What's the world going to do hm? With two of you running around.."

Shikamaru's body moved on it's own, reaching forward to grab Deidara by his cloak with both hands and pulling him close. "Listen

here you son of a bitch." He snarled, sneering at how wide the bright blue eyes had suddenly become. "The difference between Hidan and me is that he tends to sling around empty threats. When I say something, I fucking mean it. So listen closely, if you don't adjust your fucking attitude, I'm going to kill you. End of story."

He shoved him back into his original position, giving an uncomfortably silent Sasori and a slightly grinning Kakuzu equal glares. "I'm at my breaking point here, guys. I just want to find Hidan, kill the bastards that caused all this, and go back to living my life. If not, I swear to whatever Gods you all worship that I'm going to lose my mind. And then... *then* you'll have a problem."

The silence dragged on, and the Jashinist thought maybe he'd taken it a little too far. Then again, he didn't really care. Deidara was obnoxious and annoying, and someone needed to shut his mouth.

The Nara had had just about enough. From killing random strangers to being blown up, putting up with Kakuzu in that humiliating situation, and being treated like dirt by a blonde moron that knew damn well he would get his ass kicked if anything brewed to a physical fight between them. It was all just too much.

Everything was always too much.

"Well, we're here anyway." Sasori finally said, eyes flicking back and forth between the two stitched up men. "Not a moment too soon, it seems."

The blonde beside him hmph'd, and turned to pilot the clay bird down to the desolate looking building that was seemingly out in the middle of nowhere.

"You three can cool off and get some rest. I'll stand watch."

The bird swooped down, flapping its clay wings a few times before landing heavily on the ground. Shikamaru found himself wondering briefly how the hell something made from solid clay managed to fly,

but dismissed it. Who the fuck cared how it happened? There was a lot of stuff that went on in the world that was un-explainable.

Sasori hopped off and moved toward the building, swinging his arm out and back while the door inexplicably opened on it's own.

*Chakra strings...* Shikamaru reminded himself. Maybe he wasn't such a lame guy. He could manipulate just about anything with those things after all.

"Hey, I'm tired, wanna hurry the hell up, hm?" Came Deidara's deceptively manly voice.

Shikamaru regarded him darkly, and let himself slide off the crude falcon sculpture. How could that blonde idiot insult Hidan's intelligence with the way he acted?

He trudged on after Kakuzu and Sasori, stuffing his hand in his pockets and absently scanning the building. Another warehouse, by the looks of it. At least he knew the Akatsuki favored the classics.

Why there was a random abandoned warehouse out in the middle of nowhere, he didn't know. And he wasn't going to ask, because, again, who fucking cares? He was far too exhausted to be curious right now. Which was a good thing, he reasoned. Being this tired spared him the agony of biting at the bit to take off immediately and rescue his lover, but having to wait on his little band of merry men to rest up.

If anything they were probably only doing this for his sake. He honestly didn't even want to know how he looked right now. Half naked in a pair of pants made by his arch enemy with frankenstein stitches running all across his body... They'd be gone by morning, if not tonight, but still, he probably looked just pitiful.

"So what, is this like a hotel inside?" He slurred out, blinking in surprise. Huh, he was more pooped than he thought.

"There are rooms and mattresses, if that's what you're asking. Along with meager preserved food rations. It is a safehouse, by and by." Sasori replied calmly, flipping a switch and waiting for the lights to flicker on.

*By and by?* Who the hell used that saying anymore?

"I don't even care about food. I just want a fucking nap..." He trailed, staring at the scene that presented itself before them.

It looked like an abandoned warehouse... *just* an abandoned warehouse. Dusty floors, cobwebs, old rusty machinery scattered around. Vacant and old and decomposing.

He blinked.

"Uh... is this the right place Sasori?" Deidara said from behind.

"Hm..." Replied the puppeteer. "I think this is Itachi's work."

"An illusion?" Shikamaru said wearily. "Well... hurry up and turn it off. I'm gonna collapse."

"I don't know genjutsu." Was the nonchalant reply.

Shika's head snapped over to him, a grimace contorting his face. *You've got to be FUCKING KIDDING ME !* "Will it go away if we just walk through it?"

"You don't know the bastard that well, do you hm?" Deidara said, starting forward. His footsteps echoed in the enormous empty room. "This might as well be reality. He doesn't half-ass anything, yeah."

The Nara slapped a hand to his face, dragging it down until it dropped from his chin and fell limply to his side. "What a drag..." He breathed, before letting his feet fall out from under him. He grunted slightly when he hit the ground, and the blonde stopped exploring the room long enough to glance back and roll his eyes.

"There is a way to disspell it." Kakuzu finally spoke up over his own ricoheting footsteps. "He usually leaves a 'spare key' around, as Hidan always says... We just have to find it."

"Have fun with that..." Shikamaru said, now laying flat on his back. "I'm... I'm just gonna lay here for a second.."

*And maybe pass out for a few hours...*

Yeah, that will help me find Hidan.

*Relax and let go...*

As long as I don't have a nightmare...

---

..

...

"Pineapple head."

He felt his brow pinch, dammit, he just fell asleep... Couldn't Hidan let him get some rest?

"Hm?" He replied groggily. Damn, why was he so cold all the sudden? He shivered, and tried to open his eyes.

Nothing. He couldn't see anything... right, probably because he was trying to sleep. The lights were off.

"It hurts.." Hidan's voice said softly, far too softly.

"What hurts?"

He rolled, reaching out to find him. It's freezing in here.

"Everything..." Hidan said quietly again.



"Why?"

Silence.

"Hidan?" He reached out further. Where was he? Why was it so cold? Why was he in pain?

Still no reply. His hand brushed against something warm, and he grasped it.

There was something on his hands, warm and wet and thick. Too thick to be water...

It smelled. It smelled like pennies.. what was warm and wet and smelled like pennies.

"Where are you? I can't see..."

His hand roamed further, he felt the outlines of a chin, lips, a face. All wet, warm and wet and smelling just like... like blood.

"Hi-hidan?"

"It hurts so bad..."

He retracted his hand when it roamed back down, coming in contact with something stringy and squishy. Right where his chest should be.

"I'm trying... it won't feel better."

"Hidan what is this?" He said, slowly getting frantic. "Where's your body!?"

More silence.

"Hidan!"

Nothing. No reply. He was so cold, but his hands burned. They sizzled everywhere the blood touched. He drew them back, trying to see. His eyes wouldn't open, Hidan wouldn't speak, his hands were ON FIRE!

"HIDAN!?"

He gasped and bolted upright, eyes like saucers and all sense of exhaustion gone suddenly from his body.

His eyes met christmas colors from across the room, silently questioning him. He jumped his gaze over to find baffled bright blue studying him, and then movement beside him attracted his wide stare to a soft brown.

"What happened?" Sasori asks in his emotionless voice.

Still panting, the spikey haired man circled his vision back around to his other two companions at their various places in the room.

"Are you gonna flip out on us man? We really don't need two psychos in the club, hm." Deidara says loudly while returning to his inspection of the wall.

"Wha... did I fall asleep?"

The red-head continued staring blankly at him for a moment before answering. "You closed your eyes for approximately twenty-six seconds."

Shikamaru considered this, looking down at shaking hands, stitches running across the base of each finger though the skin seemed to no longer need them.

"Holy shit..." He muttered, looking up and directly meeting Kakuzu's narrowed eyes.

"We don't have time to stay here and rest. We need to go now."

"Awe geez, make up your mind yeah?!"

"Why the sudden rush?"

"I just.. we just need to go. He's in serious fucking trouble this time!"

"How do you know hm?"

"I JUST DO! Quit fucking argueing with me! Let's just go!"

He Pushed up to his feet, whirling around to push back open the doors that has slipped shut behind him. Just as he reached out a hand was on his shoulder, and hesitating, he jerked his head around to glare at whoever was stopping him.

The coffee-colored skin of Kakuzu's hand angered him at first, for the fact that the bastard was not only stopping him, but touching him. But some of the anger died away to make room for the confusion that trickled in when he turned further, meeting everyone's concerned eyes.

"Hidan is fine. His immortality will last for the night." Kakuzu said lowly, eyes flicking for a second over to the left, where the redhead was standing stoicly behind him.

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed before popping back open briefly. Of course... Sasori and Deidara didn't know about Jashinism. They didn't know they had to kill people to stay alive. In fact... Kakuzu and Itachi were probably the only ones that know.

Awe damn, and he'd just explained all that shit to them, no wonder Kakuzu had been so blizzfully quiet.

"It will do us no good to go charging out into the night without a plan or even any idea as to where he is. " The old man continued, letting his hand fall away. "He's been in bad situations before and come out just fine. There is no rush here, there is plenty of time."

The Nara blinked hard.

Was Kakuzu... *comforting him?*

What the hell!?

***Kill him Shikamaru..***

What? Why? He's not even being a bastard.

*Give him to Jashin.*

Shut up and leave me alone.

***KILL HIM NOW!***

He flinched violently away from the man, receiving a raised brow in question. He stared blankly for a few minutes, nearly ready to burst into tears at the stress that kept being poured onto him in layers.

Why? Why was this happening?

Any of it, all of it. People trying to kidnap him, 'accidentally' murdering them, hiding the evidence like some two-bit criminal. Teaming up with the most aggravating people in the world to rescue the man who was supposed to make his life better but insisted on constantly shoving him closer and closer to the brink of insanity. Hearing voices in his head demanding he kill Kakuzu.

WHY!?

He hated the man sure but he didn't want to kill him. He didn't want to kill anyone. He was Shikamaru Nara. Somewhere in there he was still easy-going Shika. He liked to watch the clouds and enjoyed simplicity and the occasional game of chess. He never held grudges because anger never solved anything... even though it had somehow become something he relied on, and forced him to do unthinkable things when he relinquished his self-control to it.

He'd fallen in love with a psycho and devoted himself to a slaughter God that had apparently owned his soul all along. And now the man

he was stealing Hidan from that was incapable of being anything other than an ass was being *nice* to him.

This was all just so unfair.

"I didn't ask for this..." He muttered out loud. He knew his eyes were wide, he knew they were probably shining with tears. He didn't care. All this time he kept saying he was going to have a mental breakdown, he was going to lose his mind. Everyone, even he himself, had brushed it off as a joke. But it was happening now. He was breaking.

*Is that why you waited so long Jashin? What good is the perfect Jashinist when he has a defective brain...*

Kakuzu's eyes narrowed, but not in the usual angry way. In fact, is Shikamaru weren't mistaken, it almost looked like some strange mixture of recognition and concern.

"I can't handle this shit..." He mumbled again. "I need to go. I don't care if there's time. I can't do it. I can't do anything. I wasn't meant to be crazy, I'm not like him!" His voice got louder and louder with each word, more and more frantic, like an animal trying to break out of a cage.

*It hurts Pineapple head... It hurts so bad.*

Shut up. Oh please.. just shut up.

"What the hell is wrong with you hm?"

"You're being irrational. You need rest."

"Is he gonna freak out on us? Cause I'll ditch this mission, I didn't sign up to be a therapist, hn."

*Time doesn't mean shit any more... So quit clinging to it like some mortal.*

I don't understand. What do you want from me?

"Keep looking for the key, brat. We can do nothing to help this situation."

"Good. I don't want to be a part of this shit anyway. Drama-queen."

*Last time you said that to me you died...*

He slapped his hands to each side of his head, wishing desperately that Kakuzu would stop standing there so awkwardly and just go away like the other two. He couldn't stop freaking out, but the man could at least give him some damn privacy.

"Why you children keep getting granted this 'gift' continues to elude me." He finally said, still studying Shikamaru emotionlessly. "You can't handle it. Either of you."

"Please go away.." Shikamaru groaned.

*Stop talking and kill him.*

"How will that help?"

"Just leave me alone! I don't want your fucking company."

"Being left alone when you're breaking causes nothing but harm."

He stiffened, looking up at Kakuzu cautiously.

"Hidan went the same way. Secluded himself so no one would see him fall apart. You can see what good that did him."

The younger opened his mouth, and let it shut again for the fact that he had no idea how to respond to this. Kakuzu being nice. This couldn't really be happening. Surely this was still a part of the nightmare.

"Why.." He finally said, getting nothing in response but the usual stare for a total of six heartbeats.

Finally he shifted to turn and look back, the other Akatsuki members were all the way on the other side of the warehouse, studying some old rusty machine and chatting amongst themselves. When he turned back, he reached up and smoothed his hair back over his head.

"For whatever reason, Hidan came into my life. And for whatever reason, he has yet to leave it. And now you're here too, same story, different person. Maybe it's because I have more experience, maybe it's because Karma has a grudge against me. But whatever the reason, I've been given the challenge of making sure you immortals remain immortal."

Shikamaru stared dumbly. So.. Kakuzu is supposed to be a guardian or something?

"I am a stable part of reality. For the time being you can use that as a focus object, Hidan said it helped him in his foggy moments."

"They want me to kill you.." The younger finally blurted out. It was enough, he didn't want Kakuzu's help. Especially not if he was going to keep bringing up Hidan. He couldn't take it, the insinuation that Kakuzu had helped the zealot to stay at least halfway sane in his time of need. He did not want to think of Kakuzu as a good person, He did not want to think of him as being much deeper than he seemed, of actually having a heart underneath all the arrogance and cruelty. "Every fucking time I look at your.. your *stupid face!* Kill him, kill him, kill him! And Hidan's in the background, Help me, help me! I can't help him if I kill you and I can't... I just can't!"

He twirled on heel and kicked the heavy door open, wincing when something cracked in his leg. Apparently he wasn't completely healed up yet.

"Every time I close my eyes I have some fucking nightmare. And they're vivid and real and I can't even tell they're just dreams until I wake up and even then I'm not sure if they're dreams or some kind of sign."

He stomped out into the grass, inhaling the crisp night air deeply.

"Everyone wants me to save them... Everyone keeps switching sides." He turned around to look at the older man, still standing stoic in the doorway. " *Stable*, you say. Nothing has been fucking stable in my life since you two nutjobs had to come live beside us! This is your fault just as much as his. *He's corrupted me*, WELL YOU LET HIM!"

"I am not his guardian or caretaker, boy."

"Yeah well you sure try to act like it don't you? What *are* you to him then huh? Seriously, I just want to know, because you treat him like shit and then try to pretend like *you're* the one who has it rough."

"I don't think you really want to play these games with me."

"I'm not fucking playing games! Why did he choose you!? What the hell am I lacking!? We. Were meant. To be. Together. And yet somehow you ended up with him anyway!"

"You were not ' *meant to be* '. You were one of his projects. He converted you, taught you the basics and left. It's part of his religion."

"That's not true!"

"Isn't it though? He's not with you, is he? Like you said, he chose me."

"You have no idea-"

"I have plenty of idea." Kakuzu barked, finally stalking out toward him. Shikamaru frantically forced his body not to shrink away from the man that suddenly seemed so much bigger than him. "Do not give me that girly bullshit about how 'you know him better because



you love him'. I have pulled that idiot out of danger more times than you could even count. I have torn weapons out of his hands and kept him from spilling his own blood in a desperate attempt to escape the life he was dealt. I have listened to his inane blabbering about his God and I have picked him up off the ground and carried him every time he tried to give up. I did not *have* to do any of that. You don't think my life would be simpler without him too?"

Shikamaru swallowed heavily, clenching and unclenching his fists, trying desperately to keep listening and not just attack the bastard.

"You may think me *cruel* boy, but I know what works. Hidan may be a person, but he is not *just* a person. You cannot treat him like some average human, he does not think like a normal being and does not react like one. He knows this just as well as I do. And he knows that when he needs someone, I am there. *A stable part of reality* ."

He leaned back into a normal standing position, taking a deep breath.

Shikamaru relaxed, trying to slow down his suddenly heavy breathing, while processing all this information.

"You are not stable. How can someone with a broken mind find what they need in someone else with all the same problems? All it does is feed the fire. *That*, boy, is why he chose me."

He regarded Shikamaru silently for a seemingly endless amount of time. The jashinist stared right back, waiting for his emotions to stop warring within him, waiting for his thoughts to stop being so jumbled, waiting for anything to organize itself into some sort of rational anything that he could state aloud.

He wanted to disagree, and say something to prove the old man wrong. He wanted to get pissed, let the rage take over him and just beat the bastard until he was dead. And he wanted to collapse there on the ground and just wait until he died.

Mostly because he was right.

Even though, at the same time, he wasn't.

Hidan was better now. Shikamaru had seen it himself. His eyes weren't the same, they were full, clear, like the sanity had come back. when he regained his memory, he regained his mind. Jashin did it on purpose too, he suddenly realized. Kakuzu had been Hidan's stability when he needed it, and now that Shikamaru needed someone, he'd let Hidan remember. He'd let the man find peace so that he could be the rock that Shikamaru needed.

*Is that why you waited? Hidan wasn't ready yet?*

He looked at the man standing before him. Fine, so he wasn't such a bad guy. He was still a prick, but not an awful person. He could give him that. And shit, he'd even distracted the Nara from his freakout. Maybe his method really did work.

*But that doesn't mean I'm giving up.*

He had his time with Hidan. It was all too clear that he and the psycho were matched up now. Kakuzu had done his duty and now he was free. That was a good way to look at it, right? After all, not in that whole entire speech had he ever stated that he did all the stuff he did simply for the fact that he loved the crazy albino.

"Hey! We got it fixed, you can quit making out now, yeah!"

Both men turned to glare daggers at the blonde, who immediately shut his mouth and backed up into the building which was now inexplicably dark inside.

They both exchanged glances before Shikamaru finally rolled his eyes and started back toward the doors. The sound of the grass sifting behind him told him that Kakuzu was following.

"Not in a million fucking years..." He muttered.

"At least you two aren't *exactly* alike..." The older man said behind him. "Hidan wouldn't shut up about his affection for me."

"Shut up Old Man." He said quickly.

Damn, maybe he should just kill him and look for Hidan himself.

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A/N-

Yeahhhh...

Okay... well.. Uh. Yeah.

Lol. Mostly filler... sorry, I'm just. Lol, running low on ideas at the moment. So I decided some comic relief was probably due, and since Hidan usually fills that role, but he's preoccupied at the moment, I figured, who better than the Barbie!? Lol, so yeah. Saso and Dei. They're back, and going to be large roles from here on out, probably.

So, some of the things people have been wondering. 'Is Itachi, Neji, or Sasuke going to be in this story?' Yes, yes, and yes. Lol, of course. In fact next chapter after this one is going to be like a small arc that's going to connect everyone back together. It will either be Neji POV or Sasuke. I haven't decided. Maybe both. Give me your vote in a review I guess.

'Is Pein actually going to have anything other than those lines?' Yes.

'Where the hell is Konan?' Go back and read, I mentioned her. Lol. Sorry, she's just like, my least favorite Akatsuki. SHE DOESN'T EVEN DO ANYTHING!

'So Wierdo, why *did* he choose Kakuzu?' I think that question has been pretty well answered now. See, I believe that a story should not just be a story. It should be like a memory of something that actually happened. Life is nowhere near black and white, there are so many

shades of gray that being ignorant is literally the only way to stay sane. There are always two sides to every story, and now we know Kakuzu's side, seeing as Hidan isn't as much of an open book as we'd like.

So, uh, yeah. What's everyone think of Shika's slow descent into madness? Do you enjoy it? Is it annoying for him to keep going back and forth? Wish he'd just accept it and get it over with? Let me know with reviews. They are loved.

Well, I had a lot more to say but this author's note is long as fuck, so, I'll see you all next chapter.

# To each his own

## Come What May

It was a beautiful day, he thought to himself. For Autumn as it was... maybe a little on the balmy side, but still nice.

Mornings always seemed to take forever to come recently, for the past few months it seemed. His strange discomfort of the dark didn't confuse him, it made perfect sense given all the moronic crap he'd gone through some time ago. It was always at night, when the daily distractions of his life slowed to a creeping lull, he found himself most often too discomforted to sleep. Especially when that blasted Uchiha decided not to keep him company through the small hours...

But the morning always came eventually, the light and clarity of mind following closely behind the rising sun.

And this one was good, he decided, if just a bit balmy.

He ran a hand over his long Hershey hair, held tightly in a banded fishtail now and draped down his left shoulder instead of the free-flowing cascade it was usually in.

*"You're practically begging not to be taken seriously."* His short-haired boyfriend had said with a roll of his eyes. *"How many times do I have to snatch you by that shit before you realize it's just a hazard? Long hair is for girls anyway."*

Even now he scoffed at the memory of the man's words. All the Hyugas had long hair, every man in his clan had beautiful, flawless locks. It would be an insult to his family if he chopped it off. He'd voiced this, only to be insensitively challenged with a raised brow and a gesture to his covered forearms. *"And those aren't?"*

He couldn't have argued with that if he wanted to. Despite the fact that his lovers arms were far worse than his own, there was truth in

the fact. He'd shamed himself already just by showing such unabashed weakness, and all because of 'some boy', as his father put it. Though it wasn't quite the truth, the pain and anger of that time had faded long ago, and it was hard for him to keep his facts straight anymore, what with the foggy, depressed memories and the various alcohols constantly forced down his throat by the 'boy' he found himself with now.

Really, In his clans eyes he'd already shamed himself enough for six lifetimes. But that still didn't mean he had to part with his hair.

So he kept it subdued with an army of hairbands, having it look like a horse tail and having to withstand the onslaught of teasing from the youngest remaining Uchiha clan member was well worth it, as far as he was concerned.

He smiled absently, twisting the teased end between his fingers as he slowly walked along the side-streets. He stared straight ahead, being sure not to hold himself too rigidly as he moved along, seeing as that would give his pursuer the notion that he was aware of being tailed.

*It's about damn time..* He thought loudly in his head to keep himself from saying it aloud.

He'd been puttering around uselessly for months while his significant other had been on another outing with his older brother. It wasn't as if he did anything relevant when the man was home aside from training, but his days just seemed to hold more purpose when the brooding, dark, beauty of a man was around, as much of a bastard as he could be.

Crunch, crunch, crunch went his shoes on the sand and gravel-covered sidewalk, pervading his ears and making him strain to listen over the noise, though of course there was no sound to be heard from his stalker.

One of his biggest obstacles in his training sessions was trying to get along without his byakugan. To him it was a somewhat ridiculous ideal, mostly only for the fact that it made him uncomfortable and frustrated, but he supposed it made sense seeing as the Hyuga had almost lost his sight completely when he'd over-used it in his first real battle with the man now shadowing him.

It had helped immeasurably though, he was both pleased and irritated to admit. Learning how to pick up one someones chakra essence without having to see it, being able to sense the presence of another being while not having to so much as open ones eyes, it was certainly a learned trait, and on the plus side it had tremendously decreased the number of migraines he regularly used to suffer.

Neji Hyuga used this newfound skill now, seeing as the person who was unmistakeably Sasuke following him would likely have his own visual skills activated fully in attempt to catch him in a genjutsu, seeing as his first and strongest defense against it was prohibited in their scraps against each other.

He could argue easily that it was unfair to have his sparring partner be able to use his eyes while he couldn't, but not only did the idea strike him as childish, there was plenty of reason behind it. If Neji could figure out how to keep from falling into a genjutsu from the 'almighty' sharingan, there would be very little that he couldn't get himself out of when faced against a real opponent. As well as the fact that though they were both visual bloodline limits, the byakugan and Sharingan were surprisingly unsimilar in all their rules and regulations, as he'd been interested to learn. They could both leave you blind when overused, but Sharingan had several different levels and was admittedly much more complex, whereas Byakugan was just the ability to see a persons inner chakra paths like x-ray glasses, through anything.

And, first and foremost, Sasuke and his older brother were being kind enough to help him rise above his past and become stronger, even though Itachi had more than enough to deal with(as he

surmised from Sasuke, seeing as he rarely had any extended conversation with the man) what with all the chaos Neji's ex and *his* new lover has caused in their secret organization, along with Sasuke and his inability to just be a mindful and respectful little brother. And as he understood it the older Uchiha was also another soul who preferred the company of men.

He had to constantly push this thought from his mind, it raised so many strange and uncomfortable questions that he could rarely focus on whatever task was at hand.

Sasuke was more than a sight for sore eyes, but dammit his brother was like a God in human skin.

Speaking of the latter, he needed to be fully aware of the younger Uchiha without having to meet his eyes. Where he was, where he was about to be, what he was doing and what actions he would take in the oncoming seconds, these were all easy things to see and predict in theory... but actually pulling it off was *really* shitting hard. This was reinforced in the next few seconds, just as Neji stepped off the gravelly, asphalt road and onto the dirt path that led into the thin forest outside their small town. He barely managed to withhold the shout that tried to explode from him as a storm of flame-engulfed shuriken sudden came bursting from the trees and hurdling toward him from a completely different direction than where he'd pinpointed his stalker to be.

With only a half-second to react, he willed his body to defend and twirled into a palm rotation. However, instead of deflecting as this attack normally would have, he moulded chakra around his flattened hands to act as a magnet, catching each of the flaming stars without having to touch the burning metal and using their own momentum to maneuver them in an arc around his body and send them in groups of three in all different directions back into the foliage, seeing as it was unlikely that his attacker had stayed in the same place after unleashing that barrage.



Which meant, dammit, that now he was disoriented as to where his opponent was. And this was taken advantage of as three bolts of lightning shot up into the sky as a distraction the Hyuga quickly saw through, giving him the few extra milliseconds he needed to focus his chakra and form his 'forcefield' so he could knock the blade from Sasuke's hand as the man finally showed himself for the attack from behind, sharingan blazing of course.

This was the most difficult part of the training, he had mostly mastered being able to detect an enemy when not in combat, but under the stress of defending yourself, it was hard to remain in such a state of near-meditation that it required for him to re-locate his opponent every time he finished evading an attack. There didn't have to be any sort of concentration when using Byakugan, just the activation, and he could instantly see everything with no more strain than it took to look around.

"You're still not getting it." Sasuke said calmly, despite the fierce look in his eyes and the amount of effort he was putting into holding the grapple he and Neji were currently locked in.

"It's not as easy as you make it seem." The brunette replied back only slightly less sedated. "It's hard to resist instinct."

"It's not instinct." Sasuke said quickly before breaking the standoff and skipping back a few feet. "Instinct is something you do without being taught. You use those eyes constantly because your clan hammered it into your head that it's the best solution for any problem. Katon!"

A meteor shower spewed out from his lover's mouth and charged toward him, each fireball weaving like a snake and some even spinning through the air in an attempt to force Neji into using his Byakugan to keep track of them all.

Gritting his teeth, Neji forced back the desire to do just that and channeled his light blue chakra into his hands, pushing them out palm forward while an almost invisible wall appeared in front of him.

The attack slammed into it with increased force at each impact, sending the Hyuga sliding backward in the dirt as he held it off.

"And you have to stop just blocking everything. Remember, the best defense is a good offense." Came Sasuke's voice, suddenly behind him again.

Neji dropped the shield and turned only for a lightning-laced blade to slide easily through his throat. He choked, cursed, and burst into a cloud of smoke while Sasuke raised a single brow in question. The dark haired man whirled just in time to raise his sword and lock himself in another stalemate with his boyfriend, currently coated in shimmering, light-blue armor very similar to that of his Susano'o.

"You've gotten pretty good at making clones without detection though."

"Good thing too, since you would have just killed me otherwise."

"If I held back then you wouldn't learn properly. We've been over this you whiner."

Neji wrenched his blade away, the one he'd started carrying after Sasuke got it for him for his birthday. It was similar to the Uchiha's slim Katana, aside from the point that the edges were thickly serrated. It was a weapon obviously meant to cause as much desecrated damage as possible instead of just slicing through things. It also helped him immensely when fighting sword to sword, seeing heavily toothed edge served well to grab Sasuke's blade and rip it from his hands.

He did so now, freeing his other hand from the hilt to push out toward Sasuke. Using his chakra to manipulate the polar magnetics in his chakra, he altered it so that it was the same 'channel' as Sasuke's. He'd learned this trick (though he called it by accident to spare explanation) through much research and training. He'd heard from Itachi that the leader of their organization also had visual-prowess, and he had a signature set of moves that could attract and repel any

object, animate or otherwise. Neji had been strangely taken by this information and thought maybe that he could do something similar if he could learn to better manipulate the sensitive magnetic responses in chakra, after all, like any creation of the human body, it was nothing more than a series of electric pulses. Besides, no one would be better at studying raw chakra than him, so there was no one more qualified for the job, so maybe it was a bit of a bluff to say he'd been doing nothing in the man's absence.

He was successful, in the end, proved true when Sasuke's body suddenly betrayed him and flew backward without Neji so much as touching him. The look on his face as this occurred had Neji struggling to keep his features neutral. He'd never actually let on to his lover that he was working on new jutsu's, and this was the first time he'd actually demonstrated it on another living being. A little risky, yes, but Sasuke wasn't worried about killing *him*, so why should he concern himself with it either?

The unfortunate thing about this technique is that it took a lot of energy, and often left him breathless. Before today he'd been steadily working on improving his endurance and stamina so he could pull off the next step of the jutsu; applying it to his whole body. This, theoretically, would attune his chakra perfectly to that of his opponents, repelling them at any instance from getting too close to him. Then he would have even less need for his chakra armor, seeing as it was tacky and made him look fat.

Sasuke came rushing back again with a small crease of anger as the only give-away that he was slightly annoyed at this unannounced new ability. Again Neji restrained his entertainment at this and held his hand up again. He'd already figured out his lover's core magnetic pole, so he could just continue to use it. But unfortunately for this plan, his opponent had Sharingan.

He raised his palm again, rearranging his chakra again, but this time Sasuke's red eyes were trained carefully on his hand, and the slight smirk that came across him immediately defeated Neji's victorious glee. He'd figured it out already, dammit...

In a second Sasuke had adapted to the situation and Neji's chakra change had no effect on him, and he had to quickly withdraw his arm and leap backward to avoid having it sliced off. Sasuke landed and stayed where he was.

"Surprisingly clever. I like it." He said, letting down the glow of his sword and sheathing it.

"What the hell do you mean, ' *surprisingly* '!?" Neji snapped back in irritation. He'd been working on that forever and the bastard not only dispelled it in a single instant, but then had the nerve to haphazardly insult him through a compliment.

"That has some serious promise, keep refining it."

"What the hell!?"

Sasuke's brows raised ever-so-slightly in surprise. "What?"

"You can't just come back here after being gone for *months*, and insult me and order me around like you're still so much better."

"But I am." His boyfriend responded with a smirk.

"Jesus christ, you're ridiculous!"

"Hn, you love it."

"Shut up and hug me." Neji said, launching himself forward and embracing the slightly taller man before he could defend himself. "I missed you. You were gone forever this time."

"If I was gone forever then I'd still be gone."

"It's a figure of speech."

"A stupid one."

"You're an ass."

"And you're a priss."

Neji pulled himself off the man and gave him a sarcastic smile. "I'm getting better though right?"

Sasuke regarded him emotionlessly, finally blinking and giving a small sigh. "You are, slowly, but it's happening at least. If you weren't so stubborn it would progress a lot faster."

"Me? Have you taken a look in the mirror lately? Stubborn is your middle name."

"I'm not stubborn, I just don't do stupid shit that doesn't make sense."

"What the hell are you talking about? You do that all the time?"

"Nah. You're delusional. Must be on your period huh?"

"I'm not a woman! And I don't resist your crazy training, I just can't do all the shit you expect of me right off the bat. I don't have sharingan, so forgive me for not living up to your holiness."

Sasuke winced at this suddenly and stiffened, and Neji resisted the urge to express the concern that made his chest clench. This had been happening a lot, and he knew somehow that it had nothing to do with their little bickering matches. He'd noticed as well that the youngest Uchiha had been drinking even more than usual, if that were possible, when he was actually home and not out on these yet unexplained 'missions' with his brother, which were also happening more and more frequently.

His lover finally relaxed again and sighed a kind of sigh that means he's about to go cure himself of his sobriety. At the same time he reached up and scratched the area between his shoulder and his neck where his tattoo was.

"Sasuke... What's wrong with you?" he questioned, putting a hand to his lovers pale cheek. The man rolled his eyes and opened his

mouth to speak, but Neji stopped him short, knowing just from that that all he would get is an irritated brush-off.

"Don't fucking tell me nothing's wrong. You're an idiot if you think you're covering it that well anymore. Your chakra gets so messed up when that happens that I don't even *have* to see it to know."

His hand was slapped roughly away. "It's none of your concern Princess." The younger Uchiha pushed past him and started stalking back the way Neji had just come from, hands in his pockets and a stormcloud hovering over him.

Neji's face twisted, he'd be damned if he was going to keep letting this go just to start a fight. You don't fucking keep secrets while in a relationship with him, He'd sworn off screwing with those kinds of things after Shikamaru and that whole disaster.

"Don't call me princess. You know I can't stand it." He was struggling to keep his voice even and without attitude as he jogged to catch up with the suddenly brooding man. "And you know I don't stand being lied to. If you don't want to tell me, that's fucking fine, but I've told you a million times that I don't do this 'lone hero' shit. You wanna deal with your problems alone, then do it *alone*, and leave me out of it."

Sasuke stopped on a dime and whirled, eyes flared with Sharingan. "Are you threatening me?"

Resisting the urge to swallow heavily and back away, Neji mustered the power to turn up his sass, and cocked his hip while crossing his arms. "Do you *ever* take me seriously? Or am I speaking another language? I made it perfectly clear that I'm not putting myself in lose-lose situations anymore if I can help it. We both agree'd, no drama or this setup is over."

"Coming from the queen of drama? I can honestly say no, I don't take you seriously, *Princess* ."

Neji hauled off and slapped Sasuke as hard as he could right across the face.

"What's *WRONG* with you!? Stop treating me like shit for caring about you! There's something wrong with you, stop denying it. If you don't know what it is then that's fine, just don't *lie* to me and tell me it's nothing!"

Sasuke's hand had moved to his cheek without thinking, he glared the glare of death now at the Hyuga and was obviously working to control his breathing. Neji was scared shitless, but didn't let it show. He'd never struck the fearsome Uchiha before aside from whilst sparring. He'd never done anything so bold as he had just now.

He did swallow heavily now as the silence and dirty looks dragged on. "Don't think I won't go to your brother about it."

"Don't threaten me with tattling, you fucking nark." He finally replied, pulling his hand away and glancing at his palm as if expecting blood to be there. Obviously there wasn't, and he dropped his arm to his side. "Let's get something straight. Bitches don't break up with me. *Dead* bitches break up with me." He paused to turn around and continue walking, to Neji's great relief. He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and forced himself to continue his pursuit of the subject.

"I'm... I'm sorry I hit you... You know it drives me crazy when you call me that though.. I lose it."

"Yeah, yeah. That's what dipshit used to call you, You don't have to tell me your life's story again."

"Not Dipshit, Dipshit's Dipshit. And may I remind you that it was one of the most traumatic times of my life. You really should be more empathetic about the way you treat others, considering."

"Can we just put this conversation on pause until I get a few shots in me?"

"No! You don't have to be drunk to handle every emotionally difficult situation Sasuke!"

"Because you would know so much about handling emotionally difficult situations, you're so good at it."

The brunette took a deep breath and counted to ten in his head. Why was he always so eager for this bastard to return again?

"Okay, let's just start over. Take two;" He said, making a clapboard motion with his arms and then slipping in front of his boyfriend to stop him short. "What's wrong? Please, for the love of... of alcohol, just tell me."

"Don't you bring Allie into this."

"I'm bringing Allie into this. Tell me what's wrong, or I won't keep a stock for you any more."

"Pfft, big deal, I'll get my own."

"And I won't drink with you, or let you drink at my place."

Sasuke remained silent, staring half angrily, half thoughtfully into Pale blue eyes.

Neji smiled, he was finally starting to get the upper hand here. "And you know damn well your brother won't let you do it at his house. You'll have to go to a bar, where you'll get in a fight and get arrested. Or do it on the streets, where you'll get in a fight and get arrested. Then big brother will have to come save your wasted ass and we both know that's never pretty."

More silence, six heartbeats total, it went on for. Finally, Sasuke gave an irritated sigh and stepped around him again. "Whatever. I'm not talking about it here though."

Joy rushed into Neji in such a large amount that he almost squealed. Hah! He won! He won an argument against Sasuke fucking Uchiha!



Victory! *VICTORY!*

"Promise you'll do it *before* you have a drink." He said, twirling happily and nearly skipping after the man.

"Hn, I promise nothing." He replied, turning to regard the bubbling brunette beside him. Neji couldn't resist the small smile that crept over him when his lover gave a small huff of a laugh, crooking the corner of his mouth. "But I guess I can try."

"That's all I ask." Neji bumped his shoulder against Sasuke's as he said it. "Is that a smile I see?"

"You're being cute again, I can't help it."

"Awe, Saucy-baby. You make me blush." Neji leaned over after pushing to his tippy-toes and planted a small peck on Sasuke's cheek. "I missed you too."

"Quit." The raven-hair snapped, wiping his cheek and playfully shoving his boyfriend away. "It was just kinda hot when you hit me, is all."

"Oh God, don't tell me you're into that dominatrix shit, Cuz I don't go there."

"You could make a lot of fucking money off that kinda junk if you were more open-minded." He was grinning again. Neji could actually see a small hint of his teeth, and despite the humiliation of this conversation, he couldn't help but humor the man. By God, he was beautiful when he smiled.

"It's not about being open-minded. It's about self-respect." He paused, soaking in the scene for a moment. "But maybe I'll loosen up a bit if you stop cheating on me with Allie."

"I will *never* give up on Allie."

"Unless I tie you down and spank you, right?"

The look on Sasuke's face at this comment, lust and humiliation at said lust, had the Hyuga unable to contain the laughter he burst into. He was shoved roughly aside, still laughing, and berated with a long string of swears before he had vauge control over himself again.

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They had walked most of the way back to his apartment in comfortable silence when Neji finally sighed. It was ignored by the person next to him, and this made him bit his lower lip in thought. Despite the previous jovilaty, he was still deeply concerned. After all the guy was going into these mini-seizures randomly, and always itching at that damn tattoo. Along with the increasing sleep-walking and night-terrors, it was becoming too much for him to simply ignore for the sake of respecting Sasuke's privacy. He'd questioned the ink before, but as usual he was either shrugged off or given some half-assed, obviously made up story about how he got it. The only way Neji knew these were blantant lies was because the tale changed every damn time he told it.

He used to be in a gang.

He got it when he was 13 to piss off his foster parents.

He was abducted by aliens.

He dropped acid and slayed a dragon and receieved a mark of heroism.

Okay... some of them were just obvious bullshit, but the delimma remained the same. Neji wasn't stupid enough to think it was *just* a tattoo, but what else it was... he hadn't the slightest clue. It looked just like those little specks he had in his sharingan.. so he could only think that maybe it related to that.

It bugged him beyond all reason that he couldn't figure it out. But he supposed that problem would be solved soon enough, seeing as he'd *finally* won and arguement and was *finally* going to be clued into the situation. He really didn't want to resort to breaking up with the

guy, not only because he was scared beyond all living hell of Sasuke's slightly psychotic tendencies, but because he honestly had somehow begun to feel pretty strongly for him. But if it came to that, he was prepared, he would *not* be putting his life on the line again, not for anyone. All it ever did was bite him in the ass.

"Hey.."

No response.

"Hey, Sasuke."

"What?"

"What's that tattoo really about?"

"I told you I wasn't talking about it until we got somewhere... less exposed."

This threw Neji off a little bit. He was afraid of someone over-hearing? Which meant, as he'd suspected, that the tattoo and these fits he'd been having were related. And it also meant that whatever was going on with him wasn't just some virus or disorder...

Then again maybe it was, Sasuke was far too proud a person to chance anyone knowing he had some disability...

"So it's not just a tattoo is it? I thought so."

"You shouldn't think so much. Gives you gray hair."

"Does it have something to do with... you know.. what happened to your family?"

"No." Came the quick and absolute reply.

Well, that ruled out *that* suspicion. It was the only thing he could think of that would cause night-terrors and the incessant need to be constantly inebriated, and then cry and vomit yourself to sleep. It

seemed a little far-fetched though, I mean, it's not like anyone would blame him for being tortured by a memory like that. And the fact that Itachi seemed to be so disgusted that he became physically ill whenever Sasuke didn't cover it up around his brother didn't help to deterr him from the thought.

"It really doesn't? You're not just saying that to get me off the subject."

" *NO*. Now leave it alone. I told you I'll tell you what's wrong with me and I will. It has nothing to do with that, Quit prying."

"I'm sorry! It's just... No offense but... It's hard to know when you're telling the truth or feeding me some bullshit story."

"Well, *no offense*, but shut the hell up and drop it." Sasuke said curtly, turning the corner. Neji's quaint little apartment was just three buildings down. He could hold his tongue until then, as insane as his curiosity was driving him.

At least he'd thought so, until he saw a dark figure leaning against the doorway to the entrance to the tiny complex. It was pretty unmistakeable as to who it was, and he didn't even hold back the groan of impatience as Sasuke's eyes alighted on it.

"Did you *just* see him? He can't possibly need your help again *already!*"

"Keep your panties on, he probably wont stay long. He never just visits." The last was said with a bit of a sour tone to it, but Neji Ignored it. Really, the bastard already insisted on taking up most of Sasuke's time with all his missions ans 'bonding' and 'older brother wisdom therapy sessions.' Couldn't it at the very least wait until tomorrow?

Besides, didn't he have some freaky man-fish to go cook and clean for?

Ah, that was unfair. The eldest Uchiha had never done anything but help him... but still.

"Hn, You know I get tired of looking at your face all the time. What the hell do you want?" Sasuke called out.

Itachi looked up, as if not having noticed their approach. This alone make Neji cautious. Itachi was always aware of everything, all the time. If something was distracting him enough to take him off his guard, well... He would be sleeping alone tonight.

"I'm going to be leaving for awhile, you won't be able to contact me." He said quickly, completely ignoring Sasuke's rude comments. "I wanted to let you know, I don't know how long it will be."

"I thought I got to do missions with you?"

"Not this one."

"Why the hell not?"

Neji awkwardly cleared his throat, and Itachi's dark eyes flicked to him. The man made a significant attempt to smile at him and seem pleased to see him, but it was obvious that something was heavy on his mind.

"Afternoon Neji, How is your technique improving?"

"Slowly but surely, thanks."

"I apologize for not having time recently to give you my aid, but my priorities lie elsewhere. I'm sure my brother has been sufficient enough aid."

"Uh.. yeah. That's okay." It was always awkward trying to train with Itachi anyway. Honestly he didn't mind.

"Hey!" Sasuke interrupted, stepping in front of Neji. "Don't brush me off, why can't I come?"

"Sasuke, please. It doesn't concern you, and you only just got back. Take some time off, Neji has been very patient with me consuming all your time lately."

"Oh please, you just think I'm gonna slow you down don't you?"

"In truth, yes." The elder replied blandly, " But it's as I said previously. It does not concern you, and you have other things to attend to."

"Bullshit. Give me a minute, I'm coming with you." Sasuke said, slipping his hand into Neji's pocket and snatching his keys in one quick movement.

"Sasuke!" Neji cried, grabbing his arm and digging his nails into the fabric and underlying skin in anger. "Are you serious? You just got back! Can't you catch up to him? Stay the night at the very least."

"Brother, I apologize, but you're not coming. That's final."

"Shove it up your ass, you're not my dad, you're Itachi."

"You only want to go so bad to get out of your promise don't you!" Neji interjected, tugging again on his lover's arm.

"So what if I do!? It's none of your damn business anyway."

"I can't believe this! We finally make progress and you turn tail and run at the first opportunity!"

"Hey, I made a promise and I'll keep it, it just won't be in the same time frame."

"Yeah, sure. He just said this mission is going to take a long time."

"And I'll tell you when I get back."

"And by then it's just going to be even worse! I don't understand how you're not concerned about this Sasuke! You're having night terrors, you're never sober, why can't you just admit you need help?"

"Because I don't!"

"Excuse me." Itachi said quietly, sending a pair of activated Sharingan and byakugan both glaring at his calm features. "Sasuke, you're having troubles sleeping?"

"No, I sleep fine. He's just being a drama queen."

"Go fuck yourself!" Neji spat.

"Sasuke, your significant other is concerned for your health. This is not an insult, don't treat it as such." He paused to give Neji a quick glance. "What is this about night terrors?"

"And he's been having these little tiny seizing fits too, and he's always fucking with that stupid tattoo!" Neji said, giving Sasuke a look that could kill him there on the spot, if looks could do such a thing.

"Shut up you little bitch, it's none of his business either!"

" *DON'T CALL ME A BITCH!*"

" Jesus christ you're such a Princess!"

" *SHUT UP!*"

At this point Itachi stepped forward and easily restrained the infuriated Hyuga from clawing his boyfriends eyes out. Sasuke only took a single step back and glared equally at the two of them.

"Why do both of you always try to fucking act like my mommy and daddy. I've gotten along fine without either of you for most of my life, don't think that just because you're in it now you have some sort of power over me."

"Sasuke. I don't know how to make it any more clear that you're not coming with me. How you two resolve this dispute is not my concern, but I will take the opportunity to inform you of how childish you're

being. If your curse mark is acting up then something needs to be done about it."

"Curse mark?" Neji said, still pissed but no longer struggling. "You told me it was just a tattoo!"

"Yeah well, FYI Princess, I lie."

This time Sasuke was stared at in silence by Sharingan and byakugan heavy eyes.

"It's pulsing right now. What is that thing Sasuke?"

Itachi sighed heavily before the younger could respond. He released Neji to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"It's none. Of your. Business. How many times do I have to say it?"

Neji finally stopped short, breathing heavily and resisting the tears about to brim in his eyes. It was never going to happen, Sasuke was never going to try to make things work. He was too set in his ways, to content to remain alone in the world. There was no point in fighting and bickering... no amount of won arguments would change anything.

"I really dislike having to do this to you, Neji Hyuga..." Itachi finally said, sounding exhausted already. "But I need to keep an eye on my brother, and I cannot spare the concentration of leaving a clone. Sasuke, you may come with me."

"Damn right I *may*. I'll be right back and we can go."

In an instant he'd unlocked the door and disappeared inside, Neji stood staring distantly at where he'd been.

"I'm deeply sorry... Had he informed you properly of what that mark on him is, you'd understand why this is so important..."

"Yeah, I know."



"It might even be that the reanimation of the curse mark may have something to do with my mission..."

"It's fine... Not your fault."

"Neji..." Itachi said, his voice tired and apologetic but his face still blank except for the bags of his eyes being slightly deeper than normal. "Do not lose hope. What he says about me is true, I wasn't there for most of his life, but I know my brother. He cares for you, and he's trying. Old habits die hard. Think of it in the same way as trying to train yourself not to use your byakugan."

Oh great, now he was being pitied.

Neji sighed heavily again. "No really. It's not a big deal. I get it, you're right. They're hard to break, I'm only proving it by screwing myself over again."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to. Apparently I'm just the sort of person that begs to be lied to in life or death situations. Shikamaru did it, Sasuke's doing it... whatever. It doesn't matter."

Itachi studied him for what felt like forever, until Sasuke finally reappeared with his traveling pack hung on his back. He gave Neji a look that was some delicate mixture of guilt and lingering anger, then quickly shook it off and shifted his gaze to Itachi, silently acknowledging that he was ready.

The brothers stared back and forth for awhile, and after a few heartbeats Sasuke's eyes widened a little bit.

"No way."

Itachi nodded.

"Hell no! If you think I'll slow you down, He'll be even worse."

"He's been improving, has he not?"

"Well yeah but he's nowhere near our level!"

"He doesn't need to be. But I think it's time he be brought into the light. This situation technically concerns him, seeing as his previous partner is involved."

"Wait, what? Shikamaru?" Neji said, looking back and forth between the two. "What's going on?"

"No, Itachi."

"If you come then he comes."

"You want me to come too?" The brunette said, ignored further as the brothers bickered.

"I'll inform you both on the details as we move. Neji, go pack supplies, Sasuke will assist you since this is your first time."

"I don't fucking think so."

"I will meet you both by the Golden Oak at the fork in the road south of town."

"He's not coming!"

"Try to be quick. Time is of the essence, and we've wasted enough."

"I SAID NO!"

Itachi looked at his little brother, the very faintest traces of a sneer showing on his mostly emotionless face. "But Sasuke, You're not my father. You're Sasuke." With that, he exploded into a flock of ravens, leaving a baffled Neji and a seething Sasuke alone to stare at each other.

"What... what just happened?" Neji said breathlessly.

Sasuke shouted out a long string of swears and slammed a chakra-laced fist into the side of the building... or.. through the side of the building. Neji remained silent, thoughts racing to catch up with the events taking place.

"Come on." Sasuke snapped, snatching Neji's wrist and yanking him through the door to the apartment complex. "You're coming with us."

"But-"

"Don't argue." He ordered, practically dragging the brunette through the hall before stopping at his door. "Pack light, only the necessities. You can bring a hairbrush but don't you dare pack all your hair-care products. Bring two changes of clothes, we'll stop by the store and get some water and food before we meet Itachi."

"But-"

"I said don't argue! You get what you wanted, so just shut up and do what I say." He slammed open the door and swung Neji into the livingroom, shutting the door behind him. "I'm drinking half that fucking bottle of champagne before we go too.." he muttered, stalking to the fridge while a still dumbstruck Neji wandered into his bedroom. Apparently he was taking a feild trip with the Uchiha's, whether he liked it or not. Some small part of his was still angry, but it was only the after effects of the fight and the conclusion he'd come to to break it off with Sasuke.

It seemed fate... or Itachi more like, had other plans...

A/N-

Oh hi guys.

---

I'm back. Or trying to be at least.

Honestly I tried to start writing again like a month ago, but then I had this horrible urge to start on another idea I had for a short fic, but then I lost interest in it too so it didn't get done either. xD

Anywayssss, it turns out I couldn't have picked a better chapter to restart at, seeing as this is kind of like a second beginning to the story since these characters haven't been introduced as of yet. But they are now! Lol, and what an intrance.

Random fact; SasuNeji is so terriblyy fucking fun to write. Like really, it's gotta be some sort of sin.

Anyway, for some dumb reason I can only seem to locate half of my plans for the rest of the story, and with my awful memory.. well.. it's safe to say things might go in a slightly different direction. The foundation i still the same, as well as most of the key points, but details and whatnot might be accidentally altered a little bit.

I actually had to go back and re-read all three of my stories to remember where the hell I was even taking this, lol. And I must say, I'm my own worst critic. Really, so many typos and random loopholes and untied threads... I'll try to convince myself to go back and fix everything, but I've promised that before and never done it so I'm not gonna bother Hehe.

So, Yeah. I toldja it was just a hiatus.

Anywhosen, I hope you all enjoyyyy. Forgive typos and all that kinda stuff.

Love you guys and as always, REVIEWWWWWWWWWW!

# Misguided attempts

Come What May

A/N-

Before I start this chapter I want to give a great big fat juicy THANK YOU to everyone for your kind reviews and words of encouragement. For some reason Fanfic stopped e-mailing me when I get a review so I was under the impression that I didn't have any, only to find out after I'd posted chapter 7 that I actually have quite a few!

Dick move Fanfic, dick move.

Really though guys, I know you're all just random strangers on the internet but it really means a lot to me to have unbiased support like yours with this little hobby of mine. Some of your reviews had me almost near tears. I'm glad I can do something that makes others happy, even if it's not even applicable to real life. I'll try to get back to you each personally but the state of my life as far as free time goes `lreally hasn't changed much, and I'm still a scatterbrained fuck.

Now, back to the show.

---

"Are you serious right now?"

"Do I ever joke about such things?"

"Sasuke... c'mon. Get back here."

"He's not even here yet it's his own damn fault. It'll just be a second I swear."

"You don't need any more! You just chugged that entire bottle of champagne!" Neji grabbed the toddling man by the back of his shirt and yanked backward. Sasuke fell heavily onto his ass without a fight, growling in pain and clutching his bruised cheeks while he scampered back to his feet.

"You're such a blowhard, Gawd."

"And you're an alcoholic. It's obviously a test, your brother wouldn't tell us to meet at a bar and then show up late for no reason."

"It's not a *bar*, noob. It's a saloon. Just come check it out with me, they're really cool."

"Knock it off. God it's like I'm dating a 15 year-old girl that goes to parties just to get drunk and laid."

"HEY! I don't go banging on anyone but you! You should be grateful, s'not that easy when you're hammered."

"Maybe if you weren't hammered all the time..."

"Hey now little lady, you don't know my life."

"You're right about that, at least."

Sasuke swayed in place, craning his neck and looking at Neji with a challenging raise of both eyebrows. "Whoa, hey. If I'm a slutty girl then you're a snarky spoiled brat."

Neji only stared at Sasuke in disbelief, then bowed his head and rubbed his temples vigorously. "I'm not so sure I even want to go on this quest with you two. It's not worth it."

"See? Snarky."

The brunette snapped his head up, gritting his teeth together. This inane back and forth was normal between them, in fact he'd be

worried if they were actually getting along perfectly... but he was so not in the mood for this shit right now.

"You know what? Go ahead, go in. I'm just gonna go home, I have a headache, and this was a ridiculous idea anyway." He adjusted the straps on his shoulders and started slowly back toward town. He was stopped by someone latching onto his shoulder, and he made a show of rolling his eyes and throwing his ponytail over the opposite shoulder as he whirled around to face the drunken Uchiha.

"Neji, babe, don't be all pissy. Look at me, see this?" Sasuke pulled his lips back from his teeth in a somewhat disturbing attempt at a smile. Despite his irritation, the brunette couldn't help the quiver of his own lips before they curled into a smirk.

"You're a lightweight for how much you drink, you know..." he muttered, and his lover crinkled his nose while still holding the creepy face.

"One of us tortured souls needs to know how to let loose." Came the reply, along with a tug on Neji's shirt. "C'mon, come in with me. You'll appreciate this place, it's old timey and the workers dress up and sing and dance on tables." He paused, looking confused. "Well... that last part might just be me. I don't really remember much from last time."

"Uh huh. You just want to have someone to share the blame with when your brother gets here." Neji said, moving along to Sasuke's gentle pulls despite himself. Really, how was he supposed to resist this gorgeous, drunken clown? "You aren't getting anything though, you're already drunk."

His comment was waved away as Sasuke pushed through the double-hinged doors.

---

"Dammit Kisa I need to leave *now*! No doubt Sasuke's already chided his poor boyfriend into that place."

Itachi squirmed in the strong blue arms, uselessly trying to pry loose the fingers from around his waist. As usual, it was in vain. Maybe Itachi Uchiha was feared by all of man as an undefeatable opponent, but he was nothing at all once you wrapped him in a big bear hug.

"C'mon Angel," the shark man coo'd, lifting the smaller man from the floor and nuzzling his face into the porcelain skin of his lovers neck. "We both just got home, you can't leave me for those zombie freaks *again* ! Not without giving me some of this first." He shifted the now thrashing man so he could hold him with one arm and firmly grabbed his ass with the other.

Itachi squealed.

"You're making me lose my patience Kisame Hoshigaki!" He growled, pausing in his escape attempts to offer the man the darkest glare he could muster.

"Why do you have to assume responsibility for everyone eh? Your brother and his plaything are grown men. If they wanna get a little messed up, let them." He leaned forward and nipped Itachi's earlobe with a shark tooth.

"What don't you understand about ' *under great duress* '? Nagato said Sasori reported Shikamaru as having a total mental breakdown. Kakuzu, of all people, had to talk him down enough to keep him from rushing off to get himself killed." Itachi managed to free a hand and used it to shove the teasing mouth away from him.

"See? It's fine, you can spare a half hour. That old bastards got plenty of experience handling mentally unstable people."

"Shikamaru asked for me specifically. Have you forgotten that those two literally killed each other last time they got into a fight?"

"Yeah, but neither of them can die, so what's the big deal?" Kisame replied, his voice muffled as he buried his face in his lovers silky hair.



"It's the principle of the matter Kisame! Now let... GO!" He cried, pushing against the man's chest with all his might. At the same moment the big blue man released his hold and with a small squeak of alarm, Itachi flopped to the floor.

"You're behaving like a child!" He snarled, pushing himself to his knees and dusting himself off.

"Only because you're acting like a parent." Kisame laughed, pouncing on the fallen man and twisting him before he could resist so his back was on the floor.

With both hands pinned, the Sharingan wielder could do nothing but glare.

"If you think this is amusing in any way, you're terribly mistaken."

He received only a sharky grin in return before his mouth was smothered by the giant on top of him.

He tried as hard as he could to resist it, but he melted into the strange embrace none-the-less.

---

"Just try a sip! It's so good!"

The younger Uchiha waved a mug of some mixed drink in his own boyfriend's face, simultaneously bringing his own beverage to his lips.

"Stop, I'm not letting you get me drunk. There's still a mission to complete after this, remember?" The brunette refused, taking the drink and setting it aside before it was spilled all over him.

Sasuke laughed into his mug before slamming it onto the table and wiping his mouth. "Oh yeah, the all important mission. It's probably just more information gathering. I love my bro and all but he's putting too much fucking weight on this whole 'get-Sasuke-back-to-normal'

thing." He followed this with an exponential burp, whooping along with a few other partons at the display and throwing his fists in the air victoriously.

Neji rolled his eyes, then went rigid as the slurred words sunk in. Get him back to normal?

"What do you mean?" He said, nervously looking around the room at the rowdy, inebriated men and women. Sasuke may have been right about saying the place was interesting, but it was hard to notice through the ripe smell of alchohol and tobacco ash and all the noisy drunken idiots making fools of themselves.

"What?"

"What do you mean, 'get you back to normal?'"

"Oh right, I forgot I weaseled out of telling you."

"Telling me what!?"

Sasuke laughed obnoxiously and clapped Neji on the shoulder.

"Okay Princess. Tell you what. Drink that whole thing," He gestured to the drink set aside, "And I'll share my deep, dark secrets with you. Deal?" He held out his hand, face going slack as if in some important business exchange.

Neji eyed him, then his hand, and then his face again. "How do I know you're not lying again?"

With his other hand, the swaying man raised his already half empty beer. "I swear on Allie and I's relationship. If I'm lying, then I'm all yours. So win-win for you either way."

Neji felt his eyes widen, then squint nearly shut again in suspicion. "And what if you're lying about that?"

Sasuke let out a loud groan and let his head fall backward momentarily before snapping it back and staring intently into his

lovers pale eyes. "If I'm lying I'll make you a trophy case, let you chop off my balls, get them bronzed, and let you display them for the whole world to see."

Neji winced and edged away from him. "Okay first, thats tacky decorating. I don't know whose genetalia you've been looking at, but testicals sitting alone on a shelf is NOT attractive. And second, you could always break up with Allie anyway."

"Mm-mm, one or the other babe, choose carefully." He responded, raising the mug to his lips again and drinking greedily.

"You're a manipulative bastard."

"And you sir, are a boring party-pooper prudey priss-man-girl."

"That's the dumbest insult I've ever heard."

"Your mom thought it was funny last night."

"Oh for fucks sake..." Neji snapped, snatching the giant glass up and taking a deep breath before chugging half of it in one go.

Sasuke whistled in appreciation and clacked his glass against his lovers. "That-a-girl. THIS IS MINE E'RRBODY! LOOK AT HIM GO! YEAH!" He screamed out, laughing when the brunette slammed the glass down with a deep blush.

"You're rediculous." He coughed, wiping away the tears in his eyes from the burn of the beverage. A small burp escaped him and he slapped a hand over his mouth, wondering why he was so terrible at resisting peer pressure.

"That was hot. You get brownie points." Came the reply, before the drunken Uchiha finished his own drink. "Alright, so when I was thirteen, I ran away from my foster parents-

"And joined a gang and dropped acid with a dragon, yeahyeah. I *knew* you'd bullshit me." Neji stood up to leave, but was quickly

pushed back into his seat.

"Heyhey, just hang on okay. Yeah I forgot I told you all that stuff. But the thing is I *did* join a gang. I mean, kids that age just dont fucking last on their own, not even me. " He said, smirking and pausing long enough to signal another drink from the bartender.

"Anyway, here's little 13 year-old me, starving and freezing and sick and dehydrated, cuddled up next to a stinking dumpster just to get out of the wind... oh don't make that face that's not even the bad part, ya pansy."

Neji blinked hard and attempted to wipe whatever 'look' he was giving off his face. Hesitantly, he grabbed his mug and sipped on it, wondering if he could manage to distract the Uchiha enough to pour the contents onto the floor. The man was certianly off his ass enough.

"So this pink haired bitch stumbled across me, piss-drunk and cussing up a storm. She looks me up and down and gets this look in her eye that I don't like and without thinking about it I tell her I'm lost and looking for my parents...

*"Hah, you're in the wrong part of town kid." She says, " Or maybe the right one if your daddy's a crackhead and your mommy's a whore."*

*She keeps looking at me and kinda cocks her head. "You look so goddamn familiar. What's your name little shit?"*

*Right away I know there's no way I'm telling her who I am, especially if she's halfway recognizing me. I mean, my family story along with my face was an international phenomenon Neji, I just wanted people to leave me the fuck alone. So I told her my name is Naruto, that idiot we went to school with, remember? Hyper, loud, blonde fuzzy hair? I figured he was the biggest loser I knew, surely he'd be a nobody. Yeah, well apparently he's pretty infamous too.*

*"No shitting way! You're that kid that's supposedly some sage reincarnation!? I thought he was blonde..."*

*This threw me off a little bit, obviously, but I couldn't go back now. So I told her Some shit about getting kidnapped and going on the run and that I dyed my hair so no one would recognize me, thinking hey, the worst she'd do is take me to the police station to get a reward or something like that.*

*I was a dumb kid, I can't stress that enough, Neji. Dumb as fuck.*

*She breaks into this smile and goes on about how she can't believe her luck, how her boss 'ain't gonna believe this shit', and all kinds of stuff like that. Then she suddenly goes into this fake maternal act, telling me shes gonna help me find my parents which I know is a lie because everyone knows Narutard is an orphan too. But she promised me a meal and a warm place to sleep, and I wasn't gonna spend the night in this shitty weather again if I didn't have to. So I went with her, and she intruded herself as Tayuya and took me to this wierd little hideout place, made me cover my eyes the first couple times to keep it secret. There were three other dudes there, and each of'em had this tattoo."*

Sasuke tapped at the spot between his neck and shoulder, and Neji suddenly realized that the man was no longer in a happy drunken state. His eyes were distant and sad, and his new mug of beer had lost all it's foam and sat abandoned on the bar in front of him.

"Once I was in their little headquarters they said I was their hostage. I could either do what they said and be treated like and equal, or resist and be constantly unconcious. 'Said their boss was unavailable at the moment, but that he wanted to meet me, so I had to stick around. At the time, it didn't seem like a bad deal, so I stayed... They weren't mean to me or anything, and they even taught me how to fight properly, checked to see if I could use Jutsu and then taught me how. Months later their leader finally showed up... " He trailed off, tracing his hand over some initials someone had carved into the bar.

"It's not just a tattoo, no. It's a special mixture of jutsu and science, a brand would be a better term... It let him keep an eye on me, and take over my body when I was doing something he didn't like..."

Neji's breath caught in his throat when Sasuke's eyes met his, filled with more torment and just general emotion than he'd ever seen in the man.

"Have you ever had to sit and watch while someone manipulated your body? Have you ever been a puppet? Forced to do things you'd rather die than live with the guilt of?"

It was all the Hyuga could do to shake his head. Sure, he knew what it was like to have no control of his body. Hidan had made him feel the worst pain imaginable without even inflicting any wounds... but that was on a whole lesser level than what his poor boyfriend was talking about. He suddenly felt like slime, always thinking that he and the brooding man beside him has somewhat equal trauma in their lives. He couldn't be further off...

"What... what did he make you do?" He forced out, suddenly fighting the urge to down the rest of his alcohol... and Sasuke's too.

"Anything he pleased. Use your imagination. He was a pedophile, if it gives you more insight."

Neji jerked at this, his gaze shooting down to the floor in response to the nauseating feeling he got from looking at his boyfriend. Horrible images flashed into his head of a younger Sasuke, how he'd looked in his highschool days, struggling naked in some dark pit against invisible restraints. Dark, hungry, eyes watched him from the darkness, twitching ever so slightly while his captor fondled himself.

His stomach churned and he shut his eyes tightly for a second, only to snap them back open after realizing this only made it easier to picture.

He covered a gag, looked at Sasuke for a beat, and then grabbed his mug and quickly finished off the rest of it.

Sasuke, not looking directly at the brunette but watching from the corner of his eyes, nodded in agreement.

"You'd be even more disgusted if you saw the guy. Probably want to shoot yourself if you knew him as personally as I did..."

His glazed eyes flashed back to reality long enough for him to realize his drink was in front of him, and that his partner's was now empty. He hit his fist against the bar a few times until the bartender looked, and signaled for two more. Neji wanted to tell him he didn't need any more, as he normally would have at this point. But he instead decided he'd just swipe Sasuke's from him when he wasn't looking. The Uchiha was right, whatever brand of beer this was, it wasn't bad at all.

"I'm... I'm so sorry..." he said, wrapping his hands around the glass mug when it was set in front of him.

"Hn. I don't need sympathy. Just privacy."

"That's what I'm sorry about... I shouldn't have been so pushy."

Sasuke only shrugged, expression not changing. "Those bastards were the first people I considered friends. I thought I could rely on them, I thought they considered me family... we had good times, y'know. I was actually happy, felt like I finally found somewhere I could stay for awhile..." he took another big gulp, brows creasing in frustrated thought. "When that fucker showed up, he recognized me for who I really was instantly. He was practically drooling over me right then and there... God I was so dumb... I could have fought. At least *tried* to get away. I was mad though... they turned their backs on me just because I suddenly had a different name, like it meant I wasn't worth shit... "

Neji's eyes were dangerously close to tearing up. Damn, alcohol made these emotional moments so much worse. He really should know better by now. At the same time he was a little frustrated with the man. Did he still not see it? The whole reason they turned on him is because he *lied* to them. He'd gone through all that and still the thick-headed idiot hadn't realized that it takes mutual trust to keep relationships strong. He broke theirs, so they broke his.

"So... that's what he's trying to do? 'Get you back to normal' by trying to earn your trust? Help you work through it?"

"What?... oh... uh... yeah... That's it..." He replied, taking a sip and just like that shifting instantly back into the closed-off, brooding Uchiha he always was, seeming to shake it off with nothing more than a blink back to reality.

"Where the fuck is he by the way? We've been waiting forever!"

Neji shrugged, finished off his second drink, and stealthily slipped Sasuke's away from him. "Has he ever been late before?"

Dark eyes squinted slightly, staring into nothing under the stress of trying to forge through his alcohol-swamped brain to remember clearly. "Yeah, once. Cause he was getting laid." He paused and then let his nose crinkle. "Oh God that's probably what he's doing!"

Neji burst into laughter so suddenly that his lover jerked in surprise, nearly falling off the stool. He stared in shocked confusion for minute before he too started snickering.

"Your brother is seriously the most insane person I've ever met. And I used to live next to a psycho." He starting gulping down his beer when a throat was cleared directly behind him, and his pale eyes met Sasuke's wide ones, still sparkling with laughter he was clearly trying to conceal. Neji's heart leaped up into his chest, and he had to quickly set the cup down before he choked on the beverage filling his mouth.



"If you two are quite finished with your gossip, it's time to go." Itachi's quiet voice somehow broke through the loud saloon music.

"Erm.." The brunette studded, having broken into a coughing fit as he tried in vain to swallow the alcohol only for it to try and force its way into his lungs. He twisted himself around on the barstool when he finally had control of himself. "I-I didn't mean it in a bad way I just-"

"Don't listen to him 'Tachi. He thinks you're crazy!" Sasuke said, dramatically flailing his arms and grinning stupidly as if he'd told the funniest joke ever.

"Sasuke!" Neji halfway shrieked.

"I could light a fire off of your breath." Itachi said with a sigh, ignoring the previous comments. "I should have expected as much." He pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing heavily.

"It's your fault for being late. You tell us to meet here, don't show up, and think I'm just gonna stand outside? You know damn well I have no self-control." Sasuke laughed, finishing off his drink.

Neji's eyes flicked back and forth between the two as they bickered like a cornered rabbit. When his confident boyfriend went to take a drink, the tipsy Hyuga quickly snatched his own and slurped down the remainder as if he hadn't had anything to drink in days. He was going to need this liquid courage and relaxer if he was going to continue being sane on this journey...

"Get yourselves together, we're behind schedule as it is." Itachi said with finality. "Be outside in exactly 60 seconds or be left behind."

"Hey *you're* the one who delayed us! We were here on time! Get Kisame's dick out of your ass and relax!"

"Sasuke!" The elder hissed loudly, whirling with his cloak flowing behind him like a vampire and making Neji shrink back after slipping

from the barstool. "I'm in no mood for your smart-alek, drunken, comments. This is an urgent mission that you're both lucky to be tagging along on anyway."

He quickly snatched them both by the wrist, Sasuke hissed in a breath and tried to yank free, as if Itachi's touch burned his very skin. Neji squeaked in surprise and opened his mouth to protest, but all three of them suddenly exploded into a flock of ravens.

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His entire body felt as if it were moving and shifting around him. Twisting and stretching, he tried to scream but no sound came, and this only threw him further into hysteria.

All around him everything was only a blur, lights flying by as if in a spaceship going warp-speed. He tried desperately not to cry, and honestly he couldn't tell if he actually was or not. He wasn't really sure where he was or what was happening.

Seconds dragged by, feeling like hours and torturing him, freedom and clarity dangling just outside his reach. He tried to close his eyes and found he could still see, as if looking with his mind. He was nothing more than a bodiless entity, he knew somehow. But he couldn't understand why, his brain couldn't seem to put thoughts together and the only thing he could think was like a giant neon flashing sign in his head.

*Oh please whoever's out there please just GET ME OUT !*

And in perfect answer to the prayer, his feet suddenly hit solid ground.

His eyes flashed opened to see Itachi already taking large strides away from them both. Moving his gaze slightly to the left showed a positively green-faced Sasuke glaring at his brother with Sharingan practically burning a hole through the very air. He swayed slightly in place just before his gaze shifted to meet Neji's, and at the exact

same moment both men leaned over and heaved up their lunch, no memory at all remaining of their recent trip through time and space.

The oldest of the group only turned momentarily to witness the sight before tsk'ing and returning to scanning the surroundings.

"I moved us a little farther than I thought." He thought out loud, then turned back around and sauntered back. "I hope you two have learned something about intoxication before a mission."

"He..he talked me into it. It was all his idea." Sasuke said breathlessly.

Neji scoffed and managed to straighten himself back to a standing position. "I think I'll take you up on that offer to chop off your balls now." He retorted in the same condition as his partner.

"Act your age. I expect this from Sasuke but you surprised me, Neji." He paused long enough to give the Hyuga an accusing stare. "We need to get moving. I've depleted my chakra carrying you both here without assistance, so we have to walk, seeing as I doubt either of you are coordinated enough to run at the moment."

"OR... or... we could just take a nap."

"This is not one of our usual outings Sasuke. It's a rescue mission, making it time sensitive."

The younger brothers head snapped to attention now, finally putting all the pieces together. "Wait.. you said this involved that Nara guy. And now it's a rescue mission... YOU'RE GOING TO SAVE THAT CRAZY ALBINO ASSHOLE AGAIN!?"

At this point Neji felt sobriety somewhat take him. "We're going to see Shikamaru and.. and.. and dipshit? Why would you bring me along for that!?"

"Hey!" Sasuke said suddenly, turning to Neji. "I thought he said they weren't together anymore!"

"He did!"

"Then what the hell are we getting involved for?"

"I don't fucking know! Ask him not me!" Neji jutted his arm toward the man standing silently some feet away from the two. Two pairs of pale and black eyes landed on him, four brows stretched high in expectation.

Itachi regarded them both calmly for a second before speaking. "I would be happy to recite the details once you two agree to act appropriately."

Neji immediately agreed to do so, already suffering the beginnings of a hangover, and Itachi waited patiently for Sasuke to roll his eyes and sigh dramatically before nodding his head.

"Good decision. May I remind you that it was *you* who forced your presence on this job with me without knowing the details. Now, to sum it up, Hidan has gotten himself in trouble again. However this time the situation is a little different. Shikamaru used my chakra ring to try to contact me for an S.O.S. Unfortunately I had given the other end to Nagato some time ago, assuming Shikamaru would drop off the map and keep himself concealed. As it seems, people have been trying to kidnap him and he's under the impression that Hidan has been taken captive by the same people. "

He paused in his story to study the sky briefly before turning and starting off in a brisk walk. The younger boys exchanged glances before stumbling off after him.

"Nagato sent Sasori and Deidara to aid him as he suspected he would soon be under another attack. From the reports he received From the reports he received it seems that Shikamaru was

victim to a largescale explosion, assumingly by those trying to capture him."

"Oh my God..." Neji whispered, his chest suddenly clenching so tightly that he couldn't breathe. "Shikamaru... he... he's dead?" Tears shimmered in his eyes briefly before he was suddenly smacked in the back of the head.

"Idiot!" Sasuke berated. Neji turned to glare at him and rub the spot where he'd been hit. Despite the horrible knot in his stomach he was somewhat pleased to see a bit of jealousy of his boyfriend's face. "Don't jump to conclusions. Remember what he told you that day he came back? He can't die now. Keep your panties on."

"Sasuke is correct." Itachi continued, giving his brother a disapproving glare at his incociderate actions. "Shikamaru is fine. Apparently Kakuzu came looking for Hidan and accidentally rescued Shikamaru from his assailants. His body was repaired and they are now resting in a safehouse I cloaked some time ago, waiting for further direction as to how to go about retrieving Hidan."

The byakugan user let out a heavy breath, slightly embarrassed for having forgotten such important bits and pieces of that conversation. *Damn this alchohol.*

He'd been pissed back then to find out Sasuke had been eavesdropping, but really, it turned out to be a blessing. Well, maybe less than that, seeing as instead of politely reminding him he always chose to hurt him in some way... But hey, it wasn't as if he hadn't just slapped the piss out of the man hours earlier.

"If they're all there then why the hell do they need you?" Sasuke continued while his lover was in thought.

Itachi sighed at this and slowed his pace. "It's an extensive and complicated explanation. The quickest route to your understanding would be to just honestly tell you both that Hidan is one of two of the closest friends I have, insane may he be." He stopped and turned

around, emotions carefully masked as always. "He is a good man despite your preconcieved judgements. His behavior is simply result of terrible circumstances he is continually put through. To understand him you would need to know his entire past in excruciating detail. For whatever reason, Shikamaru has begun traveling the same unfortunate path that Hidan paved." He looked to Neji now, listening intently with blank expression due to his warring emotions. He wasn't quite sure he agree'd with everything Itachi was saying, but that last bit definitely struck a chord with him.

Shikamaru was also a good person. Even in the most fucked up of situations he always found some way to save everyone, and it was because of that, because of Neji, that he was being put through all of this in the first place.

Itachi continued, his voice softer now, eyes not parting from the Hyuga. "Hidan is not completley within the lines of sanity, as has been repeatedly pointed out. He did not get this way on his own, and I fear Shikamaru faces the same fate. He is losing his mind, and the only person who could possibly help him get through this is not only incapacitated, but calling out to him for assistance. He needs help. He asked for it from me, and I fully intend to do my best to give it to him, regardless of anyone else's feelings toward this decision."

The realization hit Neji like a train as to why Itachi thought he should come. In a sense, he *owed* his ex to be there and serve as some sort of encouragement in these dark days. But then again, he'd devastated the man numerous times, surely seeing him would only make matters worse... but on the contrary, they had made up and wiped the slate clean that very last time he'd seen him...

"This is too complicated..." he admitted, dropping his gaze.

" *Everything* is complicated, Neji Hyuga. No decision is without repercussions. You told me you wanted to become stronger to overcome your fears and stop running from stressful situations. There is no better oppurtunity than this." Itachi said stoically, before turning and continuing on his way.

"So Nara's going crazy? That's rich, some genius he turned out to be neh?" Sasuke said trying to nudge his boyfriend with his elbow, his foot catching on a pebble as he did so and making him briefly stumble instead.

Itachi didn't so much as turn around at this, but did sigh heavily. "Bite your tongue, little brother, before you make more of a fool of yourself."

The words were already out, though, and Neji's chest already burned with alcohol-fueled anger. "Shikamaru IS a genius. You don't know shit, so shut the hell up."

"Howzee a *genious* ? All the dumb stuff he's done with that crazy albino."

"He only did it to save my life!" Neji barked, punching Sasuke on the upper arm. "You've done some stupid shit too! You should be grateful to him if anything!"

The assailed man growled and rubbed his arm. "Why are you suddenly defending him!? You were just saying you didn't understand his choices the other day. Earlier you called him a dipshit!"

"Yeah well!..." Neji's eyes fell again to the dirt path they traveled on. He let the silence drag on, thoughts flitting across his mind too quickly for him to come to a decent conclusion as to his sudden change in feelings toward his ex. All he could logically deduce was that he shouldn't drink and talk about emotional things anymore, and that Itachi was one hell of a guilt-tripper.

"Hn. You're definitely on the rag.." Sasuke mumbled. This was ignored by Neji with a small eye roll. That man... what made it seem so sexy to be with someone so opposite of him?

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The trio continued on in heavy silence for a few moments until it was broken by a strained grunt from the back of the group. Neji whirled to see Sasuke kneeling stiffly on the ground and Itachi already by his side. The elder of the two made a series of handsigns without hesitation and ripped back his brothers tall shirt collar to press his hand against the curse seal. White smoke sizzled from it and Itachi's face tightened in pain, but he kept his hand in place. Sasuke began roaring as soon as his sibling touched him, falling forward and digging his fingers into the dirt.

Neji watched in horror. "What's happening to him!?"

Itachi answered through clenched teeth. "Orochimaru is trying to take him over. Sasuke can't resist as efficiently because he's been drinking, it's going to send him into a seizure if I can't seal it off. I need to concentrate."

"Who's... wait.. is that the gang leader he was talking about?" Though mostly thinking out loud, Itachi nodded an answer.

"So he finally did tell you. I'm assuming that's the reason you were both drinking."

"Yeah he said he'd tell me if I drank a whole... What's happening to his skin!?"

"He's transforming, the effort is causing too much strain on his body, the seal is taking over to protect him."

Neji gawked, eyes like saucers, as the man he had previously thought he might be falling for was slowly overtaken by his tattoo. His skin dulled to a gray, and his wide, bloodshot eyes changed to a bright yellow iris with black sclera. He was still snarling, but it had turned to a more feline sound now as opposed to that of a human being in immense pain.

"Transforming!?" He shrilled, "What the fucking hell?!"



Itachi's brow creased deeply with a lack of control over his face as he tried to save his brother. "Apparently he only told you half the story." He halfway growled in his concentration. He placed his free hand over the top of the other one and shoved so much chakra through them that Neji visibly saw it without having to use his byakugan. However this display reminded him that he had such a gift and jumpstarted his brain.

Immediately he pushed aside all his questions and confusion and activated his eyes, gasping at what he saw. Inside Sasuke's body were three separate chakra entities all fighting for control. His own gold being the lesser of the three, with Itachi's nearly translucent pastel yellow and the darkest black he'd ever seen heading each other off.

A curse mark, is what he'd called it. Neji could see why now, what kind of person would have such a macabre mixture of chakra?

Hand-shaped wings emerged from Sasuke's back with a sickening series of cracks, making the poor man scream even louder.

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF ME YOU MOTHERFUCKER!" He roared, eyes looking in Neji's direction but unfocused on him.

Squinting to see past the thick, goopy curse chakra, he spotted what he needed and sent his own energy into his flattened hands.

He rushed forward, adjusting his magnetism to Itachi's and forcing the man to be flung backward, swearing at the interruption. Using his gentle fist technique he maneuvered his hands faster than the eye could see, disabling all the key chakra junctions in Sasuke's body.

The struggling man fell limp onto the ground before the brunette could catch him, but his warped appearance receded almost immediately. Sasuke was unconscious, but safe and no longer in debilitating pain.

He let his body's charges go back to normal and Itachi was instantly next to his brother, checking his pulse first and then making the same set of hand signs he'd made earlier and adjusting the invisible seal on the curse mark.

The black chakra faded away completely, leaving it looking just like a simple tattoo again, and the oldest Uchiha finally looked up.

"Thank you."

Neji let the byakugan down, pushing the thought from his mind that even these two boy's chakra was beautiful. "No problem. He'll be out for awhile though, I had to close most of his channels to starve whatever that shit was out of him."

"Not a problem. He was beginning to test my patience as it was." Itachi grabbed one of his brother's arms and looped it over his shoulders, giving Neji an expectant glance that pushed him to do the same with his boyfriend's other arm.

*Insanity . he thought, I can't get away from it...*

With that, they started off again at much the same pace they were going before.

**A/N-**

**Alriiiiight. We're down to the second chapter of this little triple chappie Arc. And then we have a reunion and everyone goes on the hunt for our favorite albino Jashinist.**

**Warning, I've already started on the next chapter. This break really was a good fucking idea because I blew my own freaking mind with the stuff I've been coming up with. The third part of the arc gets a little intense. I'll give you a spoiler just because I'm so excited to be back in the saddle again. You know, it's weird, I thought I needed a break from doing all these unnessecary things like pushing myself to write and update, but**

**these few months that I haven't been doing it have been mostly just terrible. Now that I've started again, I seriously feel so much better. I don't know why that's so strange to me, but it is.**

**Next time, on Come What May;**

**Neji finds out why Sasuke's half-demon.**

**Itachi finally confesses the reason why he killed his whole family but spared Sasuke.**

**Itachi and Neji do some bonding.**

**And Itachi also gives us more insight into his friendship with Hidan.**

**Also, we find out the origins of Jashinism... or do we?**

**Stay tuned!**

**Oh, and don't forget to review. LOVE YOU ALL!**

# You can't handle the truth

## Come What May

Again there was an extremely long, uncomfortable silence between the two conscious men. Itachi, as usual, seemed completely at ease despite what had just happened. Or at least as 'at ease' as the older Uchiha could get.

Neji tipped his head forward enough to let his bangs block his eyes from view, activating his byakugan again. While they walked he studied each of the brothers' unique chakra.

Sasuke's gold had been the very first thing that struck him about the man the night they'd started this strange relationship. And the more he got to know about the poor man the more, and less, he understood it.

Some of his family liked to consider chakra color a reflection of the soul, but Neji had never entertained the idea personally. He never had any other clue as to what caused specific chakra coloring, but he'd seen many good people with ugly or dark colors that didn't match them at all. His own mother had had a puce-colored aura, while his father's had been sky blue, and this was practically opposite to their personalities.

He focused closely on Sasuke's now, trying to see if he'd just been blind or if that inky chakra really hadn't been present before. He quite simply didn't understand any of this, and frankly it was starting to piss him off.

As he hoped, he could find no trace of the malevolent darkness in Sasuke. This reassured him that he hadn't been missing something right in front of him, but at the same time confused him utterly. If the mark had been trying to become active again, shouldn't it have revealed itself long before now? He'd watched his boyfriend intently

when he had one of his smaller attacks before, all that had happened was a surge of his own golden glow, not an ounce of that horrible black mixed in with it.

Then again, Itachi had mentioned him not being able to resist as well because he was drunk... and honestly the Hyuga could not recall a time when an attack had occurred whilst they were inebriated.

His eyes absently looked through Sasuke as he pondered on his, bringing Itachi's softer yellow-gold into view. He'd never gotten the chance to see the chakra of the man, seeing as Itachi usually never was actually himself in the sense that he constantly kept a clone on guard while he himself lurked somewhere close behind. And there was also the fact that he was prohibited use of his byakugan while in training with either Uchiha.

Why it was so strange to him, he couldn't explain. A lot of people had similar colors, or the very same, after all there were only so many colors in the world, and 6 times that many jutsu users. But still, it baffled him.

Maybe it was just an Uchiha trait, maybe they all had warm colors as such.

He finally let the technique down, aware now in the calm silence of just how much of a headache he had. And it seemed it would only get worse, too, because there was still more information he needed.

"Eh... Itachi?"

"Yes?"

"So... will you fill me in on the half of the story he left out?"

He seemed to consider this very carefully, and it somewhat unnerved the Hyuga. Given everything he'd learned so far, and the halfway transformation he'd seen... he didn't know how much more he could handle. His last love goes and devotes himself to an evil deity and

gains immortality through having disgusting intercourse with the man who tried to kill him repeatedly... And now Sasuke, who he still wasn't quite sure how strong his feelings were for, turns out to be some sleeper agent for a pedophile that also can transform into a goddamn demon.

Really, had he been such a bad person all his life to deserve this?

"I hoped he would tell you himself, seeing as I don't know every detail..." His conscious companion said carefully. "I said nothing before because I did not believe it was in my rights to go against his wishes in that manner. His past is his, and his alone. However seeing as you've just witnessed as well as saved him from one of his transformations, I believe you are past due an explanation. "

Neji nodded in agreement, despite a sense of dread pressing low in his gut.

"Sasuke, in scientific terms, is not completely human, Neji Hyuga. He possesses the ability to turn into a completely different being, body and mind, when his well-being is threatened or he loses control of himself due to anger or depression. When in this form he is no longer Sasuke, but a weapon that obeys only Orochimaru."

"The gang leader, the one who put that mark on him, right?"

"Correct." Itachi continued, "It is a result of illegal genetic experimentation performed on him while he was unable to resist due to Orochimaru's ability to seize his body and command it. These missions he and I have been undertaking so often recently were leads as to possibly freeing him of this curse, returning his humanity, per say. As of yet I've failed miserably to do anything other than continually put him at the beast's mercy by exposing him to danger..." His voice softened considerably as he trailed off, and though his eyes were focused steadily in the horizon, Neji had the distinct feeling he was not looking at anything in this present moment.

"Neji... I do not often fail. But when I do, I have a habit of doing it so that nothing I ever do can repair the damage I cause... I have done this repeatedly to my brother, in both circumstance and in his heart and soul. I have no greater shame."

Neji, of course, was speechless. He didn't bother to ask how exactly this was Itachi's fault, because it was painfully obvious. Had Sasuke gotten to grow up with his family, he would not have been pushed to do any of the things that led to the predicament he was now in.

"I thought I had succeeded in destroying Orochimaru and all his lackies. But it seemed I failed that as well..."

"You.. you try so hard.. you can't be so down on yourself about it. My therapist says-"

"Your therapist has never dealt with the last existing Uchiha's. If he attempted to psychoanalyze us he would be so distraught he would likely commit suicide."

"Now.. I don't think that's true. As long as you're alive and healthy there's always hope.."

"Am I, though?" The sharingan user said, setting a gaze so void of anything on Neji that he felt as if he might collapse from the pain it wrought in his heart. His mouth bobbed open and close in an attempt to force out something, anything, that might convince the man of how much he was valued by most everyone the Hyuga knew.

Nothing came, as much effort as he put into it. Mainly for the fact that this last statement from the mysterious man had him deeply confused.

*Am I?*

Is he what? Alive and healthy? Yes, obviously yes... at least he thought it was obvious. It was too cryptic, that response. He couldn't

decode it without asking more, and he did not want to hear any more about the terrible tragedy of the Uchihas.

"I apologize, Neji Hyuga. I lost my composure, self-pity is usually not something I succumb to." Itachi finally said, breaking the silence.

"No, it's fine, really... " he sputtered out, adjusting Sasuke's weight on his shoulder. "You're only human. It's not good to keep everything in, I'm... glad you said something. A lot of people depend on you, you know."

"I am all too well aware of that."

Once again Neji hesitated. He hadn't meant it the way it had come out. But it did make him realize that this poor man was so far past overworked that it could be considered cruelty. He really never did rest, always running back and forth almost like a maid to repeatedly clean up everyone else's mess, never getting to attend to his own inner demons for the sake of trying to redeem what he felt he'd lost in himself.

"I meant that in the sense that people need you in their lives, whether you're saving their asses or just... having a chat."

The strangest thing happened just then. Itachi closed his eyes and huffed out a small laugh, making Neji's skin crawl in it's similarity to the way his younger brother did the same action.

"I think perhaps I can understand why Shikamaru had such a time getting over you, and also why my brother actually gave you a chance." He opened his eyes and looked at the brunette with unmistakable fondness in his eyes. "You are unique in every way, Neji Hyuga. A hidden treasure among trash. Thank you for your compassion, I wish it wasn't wasted."

"It's... no problem..." he replied awkwardly. Really, he'd never had such an extensive conversation with the man. And he'd certainly never seen so much emotion from him.



"May I ask you a personal question. For curiosity's sake? Just tell me to shut up if I'm going too far.."

"You may ask, and I will do my best to provide a satisfactory answer."

He shifted uncomfortably, readjusting and making Sasuke moan something illegible in his slumber.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to go where he was headed. Ignorance truly is bliss, he'd recently learned. But damn it all if he wasn't dying to finally solve the question everyone wanted to know.

"Why did you do it?"

The quiet that fell over the trio at this was so thick that he felt he might be suffocating. For a moment he thought maybe Itachi didn't understand the question, but one look at the man's crestfallen features told him he was simply doing nothing more than deciding whether he wanted to answer.

"You... you don't have to tell me. I don't mean to pry I just... I don't really know. I'm sure you're probably tired of being asked and judged for it. I'm really sorry, just forget I said-"

"I know you have no intention of judging me. Perhaps before you may have but I've seen for myself the change in you." The Uchiha interrupted, confusing Neji briefly before the fuzzy memory of Hidan defending Itachi in the livingroom he and Shikamaru used to share slipped to the front of his mind. Ah shit... he'd forgotten about that. Hidan surely passed on what had been said about him, seeing as they were so close.

He felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment, opening his mouth first to explain that he was just trying to get information from the psycho, then pushing that aside and then simply to apologize, but Itachi continued on.

"You merely want to understand, as do many people. But you have to understand that the question you ask is far more complicated than you think it to be. And the answer is twice as such."

His voice had lowered to a decibel just above a whisper, and Neji wasn't sure if it was from fear of Sasuke hearing, from being deep in thought, or just guilt and the resulting pain it caused.

However, the older Uchiha had once again perplexed him. He understood how the answer might be complicated, but the question? It was exactly as it was, though he could have specified more, he supposed. All in all what he wanted to know is why he killed his entire clan.

"I don't suppose you were ever informed of the Uchiha's by your own clan?"

Neji shook his head, by the time his family had moved to the town where he'd first been acquainted with an Uchiha, namely Sasuke, the deed had already been done.

"I would think not. My deeds are often considered so grotesque and treacherous that it's become an unspoken social rule not to talk of it."

"You don't have to... if you don't want. Really, I shouldn't have asked. It's like you said earlier, your past is yours, and yours alone."

Itachi turned to him again, seemingly searching for something and he looked back and forth between the pale eyes. "While that may be true, it is also the same as you stated; it's not good to keep everything in. I've only told few people anything at all about the subject, and anyone who knows the whole story was slain by my hand."

Neji swallowed heavily at this, and it was caught by Itachi, who gave a small smile of amusement.

"I am not a mindless murderer, Neji Hyuga. That is the first answer to your question. You have nothing to fear from me."

Now it clicked. He realized why it was a complicated question, as there were many layers to it. Asking why he did it was not only asking why, it was a way of asking if he did, if he was dangerous, if he'd do it again. And even beneath that there were more, all piled and stacked so neatly that to anyone ignorant enough to ask it as such, it would not appear as it is.

"The second best answer would be to tell you that it haunts me every second of every day. I cannot make a single move or think a single thought without being reminded. It was not an easy thing to do, and not only necessary, but so deathly pertinent that if I had not done what I did, the entire world as we know it would not exist. You said I am only human, but on that day I was faced with the task of a God, deciding the fate of not only the men and women I was about to kill, but the rest of humanity as well."

*This is enough... you've said enough...* He wanted to say. Just from this little bit of information, Neji knew instantly that he could not handle hearing the rest. He could not say it though, so taken was he with the conversation, so gripped was he in his curiosity. And just as well, the weight of just those admittances was enough to cripple him or any man, and he couldn't tell the man to stop once he'd resolved to finally share his burden. He was honored and petrified at the same time to be the one who would finally learn the truth.

"'Uchiha' may be a name with high respect, but it is a curse... a word that shouldn't be uttered by anyone. My clan... my people... they were not good. Not even those who knew nothing of who they were. We were an evil breed, our heritage. Horrible things were done to ensure our survival and to keep us thriving. Every terrible deed that you could think of, rape, murder, blackmail, as well as gene altering, psychosemantic hypnosis, anything and everything. Our people dabbled even in something that could only be considered black magic, and in result came what the world knows and accepts as

jutsu. No line was left uncrossed in the selfish intent... but that is not even what possessed me to do it..."

It was all Neji could do to even continue walking forward and keep a grip of Sasuke at the same time. Surely Itachi was exaggerating. No one could do such things and never be caught, discovered for who they were. As many people as there were in the world... he could not have been the only one to know everything...

"When I was very very young, I met someone who changed my life. It was through the worst of circumstances that we met, the day the man I was deeply in love with died... it was his murderer that started it all. You're very familiar with him yourself, Neji. In fact it's the very man we are about to go rescue..."

The brunette tensed at this. "You mean..."

"Yes. It was Hidan who killed him. Took one of the very, very few things I had in my life that made me truly happy, and sacrificed him to his God for no more reason than the fact that he was an Uchiha, and in the right place and the right time... I watched it happen. I was so young that I could do nothing about it, I hadn't learned any means of combat skills." The far-away look was back in his eyes now as he paused in his story-telling to vacantly check their surroundings.

"He dumped Shisui's body in the river after it was done, he hadn't seen me or it was likely he would have killed me too. But after he left I ran down the bank until I caught up with his body. If one is skilled enough with visual jutsu, it is possible to steal our sharingan, per say, and gain everything we knew and all our abilities. In my family it is custom to burn our corpses so that no one can do this. But I did it then. I had to know as much as I could about this man so I could get stronger and destroy him. I felt much the same way you did. There was no other option except for his dead. So with Shisui's sharingan and mine both, I became a prodigy, able to easily excel at anything through just seeing it done once. And able to make up new techniques on the spot with ease. I got strong and strong and learned more and more and soon came the time when I decided I

would hunt him down. I knew his fighting style by watching with Shisui's eyes, and I had analyze it so thoroughly that I knew I would be able to defeat him with ease. But I realized something, simply killing him wasn't enough. It was my Uchiha breeding that drove me to crave not only his defeat but his complete and utter destruction. And what better way to kill him than from the inside out.

So I started researching Jashinism and anything and everything that related to it. I could honestly say that even to this day I most likely know more about his God than him. But the religion is like a puzzle, it took years of constantly searching and reading and tracking without rest before I finally thought that I knew more than enough to kill him in every way possible... but with each bit of knowledge I gained came more understanding as to who he was and why he did what he did."

He seemed to be nulling something over as he paused, leaving Neji absolutly reeling and thankful for the break in information. It was short-lived, however, and Neji was wondering in the back of his head why he'd wanted to know in the first place.

"The day finally came when I decided I was fully ready now, to exact my revenge. I went after him, tracked him for what felt like centuries. Every time I got close it was as if he just teleported to some new location. I didn't learn until afterward that this was Kakuzu's expertise at work. But eventually one of them made a mistake and I caught him. He was sleeping under an outcropping of rocks at the time...

*I looked at him for awhile, letting my hatred brew inside me. It infuriated me that he had the nerve to sleep, to look so peaceful when he had surely ended hundreds of lives and ruined thousands more. How he could come off looking like some pale angel when all he was is a demon, the devil incarnate.*

*He started snoring loudly then, and this irritated me even more. How dare he not realize I was there, how dare he not sense my hatred and wake up and fight for his life.*

*For the kind of man he was, I couldn't fathom how he could be so damned careless. I could have struck him through the heart right there and been done with it. But I couldn't do that. It would have been a shameful dissapointment...*

*I kicked him as hard as I could in the ribs and he woke up shouting immediatly.*

*"GODDAMN KAKUZU YOU FUCKER!" He yelled, flailing as if to strike me. "I WAS HAVING A GOOD FUCKING DREAM-" And then he stopped mid-sentence when his eyes landed on me. I tensed, ready to fight him, replaying all my plans in my head. But instead of attacking, he scrambled to bow before me.*

*"Forgive me, Jashin!" He said with his nose in the dirt. "I didn't realize it was you."*

*I was perplexed at this, but I did not let the oppurtunity go to waste. I kicked him hard so he felt to his back, relishing in this unforeseen turn of events. It was too good to be true. I could cripple the man's faith and make him beg for death. But here was one thing I didn't understand, glaring me in the face. Why would he mistake me for his god?*

*"You dissapoint me." I said to him, and again he scrambled back to bow at my feet.*

*"Forgive me Jashin!" He pleaded again.*

*"What do you think you're doing, sleeping here while I hunger?"*

*I could think of nothing else to say, as much data as I'd collected. I never thought this situation might occur. How does a god address his desciple?*

*He looked up at me, quiet for a moment, and I feared he'd seen through my farse.*

*"But.. I just gave you three souls at once! I thought you'd be proud!"*

*"Those were meager rations. Nothing more than a snack. I crave the blood of an Uchiha again. Fetch me one at once."*

*"Uchiha eh?" He says, sitting back and crossing his legs. "Yeah, I guess it's been awhile..."*

*And he studied me again for awhile, and I shifted to grab the dagger hidden in my sleeve.*

*"You possessed a body just to tell me that... I was already asleep, you could have just contacted me there."*

*"Hn." I turned my back to him, hoping this show of confidence would continue to conceal my identity. "I thought I'd wreak havoc, seeing as you've been lazing about. This world has forgotten of my power, and they need to be reminded of the vermin that they are."*

*Turning around was the mistake I had made, trying to give a display of power, I left myself open to him. I underestimated him Neji, something everyone has done, something I believe he strives for sometimes, to have the advantage.*

*Suddenly I was stripped of all my weapons, I don't know how, but he knew where all 13 of them were hidden on my body. He grabbed both my arms with one hand and disabled me from behind, holding his spear to my throat with the other.*

*"I don't know who you are, but I don't appreciate people fucking with me. Especially not when it comes to Jashin Almighty."*

*I managed to remain calm, and did not move. He had me momentarily, but I only needed him to look me in the eyes to regain control of this standoff.*

*"You have balls kid, impersonating Jashin. But just looking like him isn't enough. Now, I'll let you meet him, you can find for yourself*

*where you fucked up."*

Itachi paused in his story-telling, making Neji blink back to reality. The man was staring sadly at the setting sun on the horizon again.

"That man leaves trauma and destruction in his wake wherever he goes..." He was nearly whispering now, and Neji had to lean in closer to hear him.

"Like a wildfire... he is. People hate him because he is nothing but danger and death packed in human form. But after he destroys everything, new life sprouts up. There are always scars of what once was, but there is beauty in the change. The night I killed everyone that shared my name is the worst of my life, it haunts me and tortures me... but I don't regret it. Not at all. "

"You.. you still haven't said why you did it..." The brunette said meekly, ignoring the voice in his head screeching at him to shut up. Telling him that he did not want or need to know and that he should leave it alone.

"I haven't have I? It's difficult to honestly it's a dark secret that I'm still not positive I want to reveal. Especially to you, Neji Hyuga. You have very little affiliation with anything it includes. Even Hidan does not know, though I've wanted to tell him... it scares me..Neji. The thought of him knowing. He would lose what shred of sanity he has left."

"I will never tell another soul, Itachi. I swear." *Jesus CHRIST! SHUT THE HELL UP!*

"I do not know it's worth sharing the burden..."

"Let me help! I AM a Hyuga, maybe I could..." Do what? Reverse time?

"I do not think that anything positive could come of it..."



"But you already told me all that... you can't stop now."

"No.. believe me. I am only preventing tradgedy. I cannot tell you..."

Neji bit his lip until it nearly bled, forcing himself to stay quiet. Fine, if he wouldn't tell him, then he could figure it out on his own. Maybe he wasn't Shikamaru, but he was still a genius too, dammit. Surely he could connect the dots.

Itachi remained eerily silent as his companions mind raced.

*Think think think. Out of everything he just told you, you can get it. Okay... obviously it involves the psycho. He killed Itachi's childhood love, Itachi went after him, learned everything there is to know about that made up god...*

Damn, this was hard to do without being able to ask questions.

*He caught up to the psycho, pretended to be his god, got caught in the act... and what? Obviously he didn't kill him... surely he's not immortal like that Dispshit... is he?*

"Well... then finish the story.. what happened after the psy-uh.. Hidan saw through you?"

Neji would swear he saw Itachi smile at this before he answered.

"He asked me who I was, naturally."

"... And?"

"And I told him I was the man who was going to kill him. Which he thought was hilarious. He asked how I planned to do that, and I told him exactly what I had planned."

"You *told* him how you were going to kill him. You didn't think that would maybe... make it kinda hard to do that?"

"No. Because I was trying to intimidate him so he would let go of me and I could carry out my vengeance. And I had abandoned those plans in favor of forever trapping him in a genjutsu and keeping him trapped in my basement to starve to death."

Neji winced at that. He sure seemed normal most of the time but Itachi had his morbid moments... it made for rude reminders that he was a killer, whether he had a good reason or not.

"So how did he react to that?"

Itachi huffed another laugh, eyes going unfocused again as he recalled the old memories.

*"He let me go and put his weapon away, and turned me around and studied my face. Immediately I turned on my sharingan, only to find that it miraculously had no effect on him. None at all. He continued looking me over as if nothing had happened at all. It was at this that I began to get frustrated and frantic. I had to kill this man, he needed to be dead by the time I walked away. But for some reason I continually threw my options blatantly out the window.*

*It was eating at me, also, as to why he seemed to think I looked so much like his god that I might be mistaken for him...*

*"Tch. You're a scrawny little shit. I don't see how the fuck you think you could kill me..." he stepped back, putting his hand to his chin, still staring. "That's fucking crazy though, the resemblance. And you say you want to kill me. I'm standing here thinking maybe you really are some fuckin messenger of Jashin, but why the fucking hell would he want me dead? And what the shit is he thinking to send some scrawny mortal to do the job. You can't fuckin' kill me, look at you!" He threw his arms out at me and sighed dramatically, then running his fingers through his hair.*

*"And here you got me all fuckin excited thinking I finally get to die..."*

*He turned around after that and started pacing.*

*"And now Jashin ain't picking up the fuckin' phone. I don't know if I'm supposed to kill you or not!"*

*At this time, I don't think I could have tried to kill him if I even did have any way to do it. The man has confused me so thoroughly with his statements that for a moment I thought perhaps this was not even real.*

*From what I understood, he actually wanted to die. And he didn't think I was capable. This would have infuriated me except for the fact that at this point I was even questioning the fact. And one more thing I noticed now is that though it had been many years since Shisui had seen him, he still looked the same as he had in his memories, down to every last detail.*

*"Who are you?" I asked him before I could stop myself.*

*He did not even stop his pacing as he snorted and replied. "The man you or anyone else ain't ever gonna fucking kill."*

*This was not the response I wanted, and I said as much. And he replied just as sarcastically as last time.*

*"We don't always get what we want Red-eyes. You tell me who the fuck you are, and if I don't end up sacrificing you, maybe I'll tell you who I am."*

*"I am Itachi Uchiha. And you will not be sacrificing me."*

*"Uchiha! What the fucking hell are you doing telling me to kill your people then you crazy bastard!"*

*"It was a ploy to make you believe I was your god."*

*"And what the hell you mean I won't be sacrificing you? Sorry to tell you this you shitter, but if Jashin wants your soul, you're dead."*

*"I will kill you first." I told him. And he gave me a challenging look, and told me to go ahead and try."*

"And that's when you found out he can't be killed, huh?"

Itachi nodded. "I struck him directly through the heart. And he put on a shamefully terrible show, pretending to die, mocking me with every single movement. I resolved at that moment that he must be the immortal spoken of multiple times but never actually seen. Everyone that had the chance to test him immortality ended up being slain by him. And I became frantic..."

"You didn't take it into account that you *couldn't* kill him."

Itachi shook his head now. "And with him being unaffected by my Sharingan... I had no more tricks up my sleeve. I accepted that I was going to die, and found comfort in the fact that I would finally see Shisui again."

"But he obviously didn't kill you. "

"No. He did not."

"Why?"

The elder Uchiha stopped his story as Sasuke finally shifted, and then moaned, and at last opened his eyes.

He looked back and forth between the two people carrying him groggily and then shoved free of them as his eyes cleared and he regained memory of what had taken place.

"Well shit..." he said again studying the two of them respectfully, then scratching the back of his head. "I'm guessing that he told you since you're not attacking me right now..."

Both men nodded in silence.

"Well... uh... are we there yet?"

**A/N-**

**HeheheheheheHAHAHAHAHAHA!**

**Oh damn, I guess you DON'T find out Jashin's origins. That sucks doesn't it?**

**But hey, you got all sorts of other stuff to think about. xD And two chapters in one day? Tch, who are you to complain, seriously.**

**Oooh I'm so sorry guys, but it can't be revealed yet, there's still so much left of the story! But maybe you can try to guess. If you get it right, I'll give you a cookie. Except not really. Because I'm here and you're... wherever you are.**

**Oooh JASHIN it's so fun to be writing Hidan again. I can't wait to get started on the next chapter and get back to Shikamaru and all his insanity. xD**

**Anywho, SEE YOU NEXT CHAPTERRR! Don't forget to review, and don't forget that I love and cherish you all. Toodles!**

# In due time

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## Come What May

*Peace. Peace. Inner serenity... and peace.*

*"Pineapple head.."*

*Breathe. Listen to your pulse. Forget the world around you, it's just the land of mortals.*

*"I love you..."*

His eyes clenched shut even tighter, brows creased, jaw clamped.

*Breathe. Breathe. Peace... Peace.*

*"Kill him.."*

*It's not real. It's not real, and it can't hurt you. Hidan is fine. He's fine.*

A quiet knock reached his ears, and he peeked through one open eye at the paint-stripped door in from on him, not moving from his meditative stance.

He stared with dark, tired eyes, and when the sound did not come again, he closed his eyes and adjusted his position slightly. He'd been sitting here crosslegged for so long that his legs hurt even though they were completely numb, but honestly he was afraid of getting up.

The voices were not stopping, but at least in this state of mind he had nothing else to think about. When they invaded his head he could keep himself from panicing.

*Inner peace. Breathe deep, focus on nothing, on everything.*

*"Pineapple head..."*

"Eh, um.. I forgot your name kid.." came a new voice, muffled and far away. This made his face contort again, until there was another knock.

"You alive in there, hm?"

Oh, that voice was real. It was that blonde bastard.

"What do you want?" He replied finally, agitated and exhausted. Not sleeping would do that too you. Shikamaru's crows feet could rival Itachi's at the moment.

"Sasori has prepared some food," the deep voice behind the door said, sounding irritated in response to the Nara's tone. "Quit being emo and come eat, yeah."

"Not hungry."

Suddenly the door was being beaten mercilessly. "Listen you little shit! I couldn't give two fucks whether you starve yourself or not but if Kakuzu has to get up and come have another 'chat' with your crazy ass he's gonna be pissed and I'm gonna get the shit end of the stick! Hm! So get the fuck out of there and come be a little fucking social yeah? We're only here to help you and your stupid wannabe boyfriend out, so have some respect and be goddamn grateful!"

Shika sighed and let himself flop backward onto the mattress without answering the enraged blonde.

"Don't you fucking ignore me hm! Get your stupid ass out here!"

He stared up at a crappy plater ceiling, crubling in so many places that if he could actually die, the spikey haired Jashinist would be afraid of being buried alive by it.

'Safehouse' indeed, Sasori, you jerk.

Again he sighed deeply, after getting Itachi's genjutsu deactivated, the group had unanimously wished they'd just left it how it was. The walls were dangerously bowed in most rooms, the wood beneath them rotted and weak, and the drywall that had been poorly installed had desintegrated long ago, leaving insulation leaking out in still waves onto the concrete floor.

Oh yes, there were rooms with doors and locks, and there were mattresses and cots and other manner of homely decor and necessities, but all of it held the same quality as the decrepid building itself.

"Alrht *mother* ! I'll be out in a minute, Jashin above just shut the hell up!" He finally snarled back at the incessant pounding on the door.

"Good decision, hm." Came the pleasant reply, and finally he was left alone again in peace.

He didn't want to eat... he didn't want to move. He didn't want to do anything but lay here and look at this shitty piece of shit fucking ceiling for the rest of eternity.

After he and Kakuzu's awkward little bonding experience, the three men accompanying him had seemed to be walking on eggshells around him. He hated it with a passion, the fact that even Kakuzu who didn't give a shit about him and had voiced this aloud, was going out of his way to try and not piss him off, was pissing him off even more!

Shikamaru had been more or less banned to go outside the warehouse without someone going with him for fear that he'd run off, which was why he'd secluded himself in this room like a rebellious teenager. And this fact only fueled his fury as well as confusion. Why were they all trying so hard? What the hell were they doing, bossing him around, *controlling* him with these rules and shit? He was Shikamaru Fucking Nara, the other immortal, Jashin's blessed desciple. They had no right to govern him like some child.



He could fight them, he supposed, to gain freedom. But even though he was infuriated by their tactics, he knew somewhere in his head that they didn't do it for any reason other than to help. Even the blonde idiot that he would love to grind into the dust was sort of trying.

And so, despite this, he spent his insane amounts of free time meditating in attempt to appease his anger as well as calm the hurricane of thoughts and emotions constantly raping his mind.

One more large sigh was shoved from his body before he pushed himself from the mattress. He paused on his feet as little pinpricks attacked his legs, cracking his neck and popping his back, then knuckles, as he waited for the blood to return to the appendages.

*"It hurts..."*

His body tensed at Hidan's pitiful whine in his head,

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

And started out the door, after wrestling with the rusty lock for a solid 30 seconds, only ruining his mood and appetite further, if that were possible.

For a week they had been at this shithole. Shikamaru had kept his mouth shut as far as complaints go, seeing as every time he said anything at all his little group would compare him to the albino, as well as the fact that he didn't really fucking care where they stayed. Anywhere else would be no more preferable, seeing as the only fucking place he wanted to be is wherever the hell Hidan was. And that wasn't a possibility, despite how both he and Kakuzu had both tried to think of possible locations the zealot could be. Each of them continually shot each other's ideas down with un-arguable, logic, points. And so despite all their trouble, despite all the time that had passed, despite Shikamaru going more and more insane as each second passed, they had made absolutely no more progress on the situation than when they first arrived here. And this was the most

aggravating bit of bullshit out of all the rest. He wouldn't have cared how they treated him if he could *just get some answers*.

"Good afternoon Shikamaru." Sasori said in his emotionless but pleasant way.

In an attempt not to be rude, the Jashinist gave them all a curt nod, trying to convince the muscles in his face to release the scowl he'd been permanently holding. He didn't know if he succeeded or not, but the trio seemed to notice the attempt.

"You seem to have a little more energy today. Feeling better?" The redhead asks.

He plopped down in the metal folding chair at the crappy card table serving as their dining area, meeting area, and entertainment area, and looked with unhidden disgust at the food set on the plate before him.

"I can't eat this.." he mumbled, pushing it away.

It wasn't even the food. It looked fine, really. And judging by the smell he assumed the puppetmaster to be one hell of a cook, especially with the meager rations they had to work with. This was something he didn't really get, since it had been revealed that Sasori himself was inexplicably some sort of half-human, half-puppet concoction, and not only didn't eat, he didn't even have taste buds.

No, he just didn't feel like eating. Just imagining putting food in his mouth made him nauseous.

"That's a big fat no, hm?" Deidara said, stopping in his mindless devour of his own food.

"Shikamaru, you need to eat. You have not eaten in 43 hours and the last bit you ate was not enough to suffice you for even half that long."

"So? I can't die. Who cares?"

"Well I call his portion then! Sasori you've outdone yourself with this one, yeah! This... this is art. Temporarily beautiful until eaten."

"That may be so but your body still needs food to convert into energy. Your muscles will deteriorate, your chakra will suffer. Surely it would help you to clear your head as well." Sasori said, blatantly ignoring his partner.

"I don't want it. I'm not eating."

"Let him be. He's just as stubborn as Hidan. If he wants to starve and sabotage this mission then let him." Kakuzu finally said, having been silently eating his own plate. He didn't even look up as he said it, truly acting as if he didn't care.

Shikamaru shot him a weary glance and sighed. He knew better though, they'd been playing this game for awhile. Reverse psychology wasn't going to work. He didn't want to eat. He just wanted to be left alone.

"At the very least stay out here. It can't be doing your mental or emotional state any good to keep yourself closed off the way you've been." Sasori continued, unaffected as always.

"I need to contact Jashin. I can't do that with you all pestering me. It's distracting."

"Jeez Sasori just let him go! I'm tired of seeing him brush you off like this hm. It's pissing me off." Dei piped, his plate nearly licked clean.

"I'm not brushing anyone off I'm just trying to make some goddamn progress here!" Shikamaru snapped, giving up the battle to be polite. "You all can sit on your asses. That's just fucking fine, really. I know you don't care about him, but I DO!"

"Calm yourself boy." Kakuzu warned as the Nara rose to his feet and slammed his palms on the table.

"SHUT UP! You don't understand, you're not the one hearing him in your head. You're not the one who can't sleep because of nightmares that show you all the different ways he's being tortured. I don't know why you're even here, he's not asking for your help!"

"Here we go agaiiin..." Deidara murmured, resting his chin on his fist, propped up by his elbow on the table.

"You shut up too. You don't even have to be here so I don't know why you're bothering either!"

"Hey! Just cuz' you're going psycho doesn't mean you gotta take it out on us. We haven't done shit but try to help, hm. It's your own damn fault for getting involved with that dumbass, yeah!"

"YOU THINK I WANTED THIS YOU FUCKING WORTHLESS TERRORIST PIECE OF SHIT!"

"I believe what this brat is trying to say is that we cannot help you unless you let us. And to answer your question, we were given a duty to assist you in reclaiming Hidan from his captors. That's what we're going to do."

"If you were given orders to set yourself on fire, would you do it?"

The sound of silverware smashing into the table sent the three pairs of eyes to land on the oldest of the group, who was glaring at each of them as if he wanted to murder them all in the worst way.

"If I have to listen to one more second of this insufferable *shit*... I'm going to kill you all."

Sasori and Deidara each got up immediatly and busied themselves with something. Shikamaru stood staring unfazed at the old man with his arms crossed.

"I'd almost welcome that at this point..." he said quietly.

Kakuzu stood up calmly, regarding Shika with his usual unreadable expression. "Come with me." He said, then turned and started heading toward the exit of the hideout.

The Nara stared after him in disinterest, not even caring enough to wonder what the hell the geezer was planning. "I need to get back to my meditation."

"You need fresh air and a decent ass-whooping. Now come." Came the echoed reply from the halls.

He did raise a brow at this. Did he just say ass-whooping? Who the hell used that phrase anymore?

*"Pineapple head... please..."*

He started after him. Jashin hadn't been answering any of his prayers since they'd been here anyway. It was almost as if the Slaughter God himself was missing as well. Honestly he'd given up trying to get a response a few days ago, he simply kept using it as an excuse because no one seemed to question it.

He just wanted to be alone, what with his only hope not replying and the whole 'voices in his head' thing was getting progressively worse... he was a little depressed.

Okay, that was an understatement. He wanted to fucking kill himself and everyone and everything else in the whole world. He couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep... yes it's true he could try a little harder to care for himself, and that alone would probably make him feel better... but damn it all... it's like he was back to the broken man he'd been after Neji left. Only this time he was an immortal sacrificial murderer who was losing his sanity instead of a broken-hearted, lonely wreck.

But... Kakuzu was probably right, (That thought alone showed how far from himself he was) fresh air and some exercise would probably do him some good. And if he was reading between the lines correctly, then Kakuzu wanted to spar.

Even if he was depressed beyond all reason, he'd never pass up a chance to kick that old bastard's ass.

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"You're sure you wanna fight me? Can your bones take it?"

"Don't insult me boy. You admitted yourself that our last battle was a mistake."

"I said it *might* have been a fluke. Might."

"Well we can clear the air right now. Then you can stop mocking me with your petty threats."

Shikamaru stopped bouncing from foot to foot in his warm-up to give Kakuzu a suspicious look. "Seriously though. Why are you doing this?"

"Because I'm tired of witnessing your tantrums. It always helped clear Hidan's head to get a bit of adrenaline running through the empty thing."

"Well I'm not Hidan. My brain works fine."

"So you say. Your actions disagree with that though. Quit your stalling and come at me, boy."

He narrowed his eyes as the man waited calmly some yards away from him. He would enjoy beating the arrogant out of the miser, at least.

"Fine." He growled, forcing chakra into his newly gloved hand until his stolen scythe appeared in his hand. In the week he'd been here he'd

scrounged through all the rooms to find some decent clothing. It had been indescribably wonderful to get out of those disgusting pants Kakuzu had made.

He gripped the sickle tightly and slammed the butt onto the ground. "You move first."

"You must think me an idiot if you think I'd do that." Kakuzu growled back.

"Hm. I don't need the advantage anyway." Shikamaru said, spinning the weapon and swinging his arm backward to build up momentum. A little more chakra unlocked the flexible spine and he whipped it forward.

Kakuzu didn't even move until the blades were about to impale him. Then he whipped out his own extended hand and grabbed the weapon just behind the triple blades and wrapped his tentacles around them. He yanked the entire thing toward him and Shikamaru with it.

But he'd expected this, and let himself be thrust toward the man, sending another pulse of chakra into his scythe, pulling himself toward the man even faster as it retracted, and also catching the man's threads within the tightly locked spines.

The elder's eyes widened half a millimeter as he found he couldn't retract his own hand. But managed to harden himself just before the Nara slammed into him with a shadow-blade alighting his flattened free hand.

He dropped and rolled, throwing the jashinist behind him, and then yanked with a grunt to free himself.

Shikamaru recovered just as fast and yanked as well, and a nasty snap signaled the breaking of Kakuzu's threads.

He sneered at the older man, his hand up to his forearm dangling from his scythe like a disgusting pendant.

"Two seconds in and you're falling apart old man." He said.

"If you're going to embarrass yourself with puns at least make them original." Kakuzu said, then he lifted his arm with the missing hand to reveal a single thread still attached that he'd hidden just beneath the dirt.

The previously limp body part sprang to life, clutching the weapon and wrenching it from Shikamaru's shocked grasp. At the same time a few stray threads wound their way around his hand, tearing his glove off as he was left unarmed.

He shouted a swear and jetted forward after the weapon now in Kakuzu's grasp. And he was surprised when the bastard expertly wielded it, pinwheeling the thing and covering it with his smokey chakra.

Shikamaru leaped sideways to avoid being knocked into next week, but the weapon followed close behind. Kakuzu now slipped the glove on in one quick movement and sent his own chakra into Shikamaru's upgraded weapon.

"Let me show you how to properly use one of these."

"Properly.. I MADE the fucking thing!"

He could say no more as he dove forward and rolled to his feet, the blades impaling into the ground where he had been. Kakuzu whipped the flexible handle around and nearly caught the younger in a mock version of a lasso just before he leaped up into the air to escape.

The weapon was yanked free in a second and shot after him, and he growled to himself.



This was fucking annoying... It had taken him forever to be able to successfully use that thing in battle and here came this old fuck waving it around like he'd been doing it all his life.

Something grabbed the front of his shirt in his split-second of distraction, he looked down to find the miser's free hand grabbing him before he was suddenly slammed into the ground.

With his vision still rolling from the impact, he shoved chakra into his hands and feet and leaped out of the way like an animal just in time to avoid being struck through with his own sickle.

He landed on the edge of the small crater left in the ground, and Kakuzu smirked at him from the other side, pulling the weapon back and retracting it. Shikamaru scowled. He may think he had the advantage, but all the Jashinist needed to do was get mad enough and he'd bury the fucker.

He put his hands together and made a series of signs, concentrating his chakra into a tiny little ball, a much smaller-scale version of the bomb he'd used to dispose of the other Jashinists he'd slaughtered. He continued doing this until each hand was filled with ten of the marble-sized explosives, and then he chucked it like a baseball pitcher at his opponent, leaping up and forward across the gap while tossing each one with as much speed and accuracy as he could muster.

Kakuzu squited at the ball flung at him, hardened his hand, and caught it. He managed to avoid all the rest only for the back that the thing went off right there and then and blew him backward, somersaulting a couple times before he regained his footing.

Shikamaru landed where Kakuzu had been and snatched up his weapon. It was literally blown out of the man's grip, though he still had the glove. He wasn't worried, Kakuzu may know how to physically handle it, but he didn't know how to work the Jashin-related aspects of it. Besides, he couldn't transport it from Shika's

hand to his own without the spikey hair's blood. He may have injured him, but he wasn't bleeding.

Without missing a beat he launched toward his opponent again, swinging the blade wildly and making Kakuzu continuously leap backward to avoid it. Meanwhile he put his index and middle finger to his lips and muttered the invocation word, letting his shadow reach up in front of him, forcing the elder to dodge both at once.

Finally the coffee-skinned man gave one final jump and launched into a vertical barrel roll. Shikamaru skidded to a stop, studying his movement for a moment, trying to understand what the hell he was going to do next. He unlocked the scythe again and cast it at him, but his skin darkened to black and suddenly the man disappeared, drilling a hole in the ground with his own body.

"Tch, spry for an old fucker." He muttered, backing up. He wasn't safe as long as he was standing on the ground, he needed to get up onto something or the next thing he knew a hand would jump out of the dirt and grab his ankle and... and..

He cursed. There was nothing to jump up onto!

"Fine, plan B." He snarled, leaping over to the hole and activating his shadows. He sent them down into it, closing his eyes to concentrate and feel what they were feeling. Stupid miser, all he had to do was follow the tunnel and... wait... that's not right.

The tunnels split off in five directions...

Oh goddammit he must've let his masks out.

As soon as the thought occurred to him the ground rumbled. He whirled in time to see three of the thread monsters explode from the earth and land heavily on the ground, circling the Nara. Without wasting time their mouths each cracked open, and a burst of fire, water, and air shoot from each of them respectively.

He dove out of the way, and the flow of elements only followed him. He made it outside the circle of beasts and continued sprinting, looking at each of them as he stayed just ahead of the attacks.

Shit, this meant he had five fucking opponents at once, and there were only three visible.

He turned on a dime and flipped backward over the funnel of fire, and rolled sideways over the water jet. He took off toward the air beast who had stopped the attack in favor of changing from a constant stream of air to a machine-gun barrage of air bullets.

He made two clones that darted off toward the other two while he pinwheeled the scythe, setting it ablaze with the dark purple chakra to create a shield as he lunged for the beast. He released the twirl of his weapon to slam it down into where the brain of the monster would be, if it had one, and swung. The threadminion, caught by the scythe, went flying, becoming dislodged just at the end of the arc.

Not stopping, Shikamaru rocketed off to assist his clones who were doing well to distract the other two, before the ground parted in front of him and Kakuzu himself sprang up and landed a rock-hard punch to his jaw. He managed not to go flying backward at this blow, or the next. Then the old man slammed and elbow into his gut, sending the air from Shika's lungs, and reeling backward, his fist covered in smog, he whirled around and landed a roundhouse that smashed through his ribs and temporarily killed the Jashinist and he went flying backward hundreds of feet.

The clones turned at this and launched themselves toward the old man, who did a double take on the unconscious, original shikamaru before engaging them both.

"How are you clones still here when he's out cold?" He asked the clones, blocking and evading their continuous string of attacks.

The clones didn't answer, as expected, and the thread minions suddenly landed on the clones with all their weight, smothering and crushing

them until they finally poofed away.

Kakuzu grunted and clutched at his chest for a moment, whirling to find the original Shikamaru awake again and clinging to the side of his air minion, which was howling in pain. The Nara's arm was buried in the threads, his teeth gritted, and in another instant the beast melted down into the grass, dead.

Shikamaru smirked when the man narrowed his eyes. "Now we're even again."

"You little-" Again Kakuzu was halted, looking down to find himself and both his thread monsters caught in that damn shadow possession. Shikamaru laughed and lunged forward, hands and feet glowing with purple, and a faint meteor trail flowing out behind him as he raced closer and closer. He'd been knocked quite a ways away by that kick, after all.

Just before he reached the man the final threadbeast exploded from beneath him, snatching it's master and carrying him free up into the air. It let go and Kakuzu hardened his body for the landing. But shikamaru leaped up to meet him in midair before he could. Surely his blade could slice through his rock-skin if he pumped enough chakra into it. He'd cut easily through that Juugo fellows rock-skin, after all. And If he managed to kill the original Kakuzu then he'd go ahead and call off the spar, if of course that's what it still was. *Kuzu* looked to be getting a little ticked off.

His opponent was having none of it, though, and he spun himself in a somersault and landed a not-even-chakra-enhanced kick with his heel to the top of Shika's head, sending him straight back down and crashing to the earth.

"GAAH! Son of a BITCH!" He cried out before he could stop himself. His spine felt broken, dammit. That really fucking hurt.

Kakuzu landed in front of him, and his body tensed as the two beasts jumped back into his back skin. "Back pains?" He said, smiling

slightly.

"Shut up you old fucking codger!" He shouted, activating his jutsu and shoving chakra into his shadows to create his own minion. It solidified into what looked like some mixture of a horse and lion before lunging toward Kakuzu. He swung his fists at it, only for it to turn to a smoke plume and continue on through him, condensing again as it landed behind him and darted off after the remaining threadminion.

When he turned back to the indentation left in the earth from the Jashinist, well... there was no Jashinist there. At the exact moment he grunted, and his blood spurted out as a hand suddenly appeared, sticking out of his chest.

Shikamaru pulled his hand free and stumbled backward. Kakuzu fell to his knees for a moment.

"That's two-to-one. I'm winning." The Spikey hair panted, wishing his vertebrae would hurry up and re-align so he could function better.

"HOLY SHIT!"

Both men's heads jerked to the side to see both Sasori and Deidara watching from the sidelines. Both men scowled.

"I didn't really fucking believe you when you said you kicked his ass... but..." He whistled to finish out the sentence.

Sasori only rolled his eyes. "Forgive him. Pretend we're not here. We're only observing to get a better feel for your fighting style." he called, then turning to smack Dei across the back of his head.

"You guys are sooo g-AAUUGH!" He then cried, looking down to find several threads shoved through his chest, and he knew without a doubt, his heart.

"Two-for-two. Even again." Kakuzu said.

"That's, auugh, that's not fair. They distracted-GAAH! Dammit  
Fucking quit that!"

"All is fair in war boy."

He quickly chopped through the treads with a chakra blade, pushing to his feet. (Ah, that was much better, he could stand again.) Then he leaped backward to put distance between them and took a second to locate his minion.

He found it some distance off, on top of Kakuzu's and shredding the threads with the feline claws. He smirked at this victory. Good, he could just let it be and it would kill off one more heart. Once he had the lead again he would call it off, his chakra was running low.

Kakuzu apparently had other ideas. He put his hands together and his two puppet masks jutted up from his back and curled around to peek over his shoulders. Their mouths cracked open, and shikamaru's eyes went wide.

That son of a bitch! Shoulder cannons!? Really!?

He dove to the side just as fire and water exploded from the mouths and came roaring toward him. He had to stop for a second to rip off his shirt, which was on fire, but other than that he was unscathed.

Kakuzu, meanwhile, turned his own attention to his mask, down to it's last bits of thread. He took off toward it, those other masks peeking from his disgusting stitched skin keeping their hollow eyes on Shikamaru, who was following close behind.

He snapped some shadow extensions from his hands and whipped them forward, catching the older man around the ankles temporarily before he was blasted backward with a huge jet of water.

"GOD DAMMIT!" He growled, stopping to observe the situation. He looked to his shadow minion, who had Kakuzu's third heart in it's mouth. Hah, the old coot couldn't make it in time to save the damn

thing. He mentally ordered the minion to clamp down and crush it with the false jaws, staring excitedly as the old man rushed to keep Shikamaru from gaining the lead again.

And then a blast of teal chakra shot through his minion, leaving a hold right through the spot where his head would be.

A white and brown blur shot out from the bush and launched a fury of glowing fists on the shadow beast until it dissolved, dropping the faintly beating heart onto the ground. The intervener then had to leap out of the way to avoid a blow from Kakuzu, and without thinking about how strange it was, Shikamaru launched forward to aid the old man.

The masks had turned around and now let loose an immense blast of fire toward the new arrival as Kakuzu let the wounded heart slip back inside his body. A light blue sphere flashed into existence, withstanding the fire and then rolling forward to crush the old man, who sucked his two masks back in and leaped backward, landing next to Shikamaru, who skidded to a stop.

Both men crouched into a defensive position, Sasori and Deidara suddenly landing next to them both and doing the same.

The smoke cleared, and Shikamaru's eyes squinted for a second before nearly bugging out of his head.

"Hey... Isn't that...?"

"Shut up brat."

Neji Hyuga stood in front of the four of them, eyeing them each nervously. "Uh... Itachi? I think they're going to attack me..."

The older Uchiha phased into existence beside him, holding up his palm in a peace offering, and Sasuke leaped out from the bush and landed beside Neji, his usual smug smirk claiming his features.

"Neji!?" Shikamaru Shrilled.

The hyuga's eyes landed on him before a disbelieving look took over his still-gorgeous features.

"Shikamaru? Oh my god... that's you?"

Sasuke cleared his throat, his arrogant glance at the Nara turning to a glare. "You look like shit."

Neji elbowed him and he growled.

"Ah, Itachi. I wondered when you'd show up." Sasori said, as always, perfectly unemotional.

"Itachi!" Shikamaru said, somewhere between surprised and excited. Oh thank Jashin! Now they could actually get shit done!

Kakuzu just hump'd and suddenly shoved Shikamaru to the ground, making Sasuke cackle and Neji scowl at the man. Shikamaru only looked up at the man like he was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. Did he just push him down playfully, like they were buddies or something?

"We'll continue this later. I won't have it get out that I tied with a *child* ." He said, before turning and heading back toward the hideout.

"Oh Jesus fucking christ, you guys finally stop fucking off and take on a mission and it has to be the one that *I'm* assigned to..." Deidara said, throwing his hands in the air and following Kakuzu's lead, rambleing and swearing the whole way.

"Uhm.."

The meek, familiar voice drew Shikamaru's attention back to his ex, now standing above him. The brunette gave a somewhat embarrassed smile and held out his hand, offering him help up. "Long time, no see." he said gently.



The Jashinist blinked, far too confused to do anything other than take Neji's hand and be pulled to his feet. He couldn't even get his mind to work well enough to reply, which made the Byakugan users perfect brows crease in concern.

"My apologies. As you can see I ran into a few... setbacks." Itachi said, walking up to Sasori and shaking hands.

"Yeah, getting banged being the biggest." Sasuke said aloud, his jealous gaze not leaving Neji and Shikamaru, until he was smacked on the back of the head and forced to look at his attacker.

Itachi glared at him. "Sasuke here refused to be left behind, He's been training Neji Hyuga, who refused to be left as well."

Neji whirled at this. "Now wait just a second here! You two forced me to come!"

"I did no such thing." Itachi said quickly, obviously masking a smirk, which Sasuke saw and mirrored, his eyes going back to his boyfriends.

"Yeah if I remember correctly you were ready to attack me if I left without you. 'Tachi had to restrain you."

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!"

"Awe it's okay love. You just wanted to see how pathic your little ex here has gotten, I understand."

"Sasuke." Itachi warned.

"Sasuke!" Neji Gaspd.

Sasori cleared his throat.

Shikamaru just stared at him dumbly, unable to process everything.

There was silence for a moment, before again Sasori cleared his throat, waiting until all eyes were on him. "Let's return indoors to converse any longer. Surely you're all tired from the quick trip." He turned around and started making his way toward the warehouse.

"Fuckin' exhausted." Sasuke said, following.

"You slept the whole damn way." Neji muttered, giving Shika one more apologetic glance before turning and doing the same.

The Nara watched them go, still dumbstruck, until he felt a presence beside him. He turned to find coalescing eyes staring at him emotionlessly.

"I apologize for Sasuke... I've never seen him so jealous before." He said, and when the Jashinist still didn't reply, he gently set a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Shikamaru. I headed out as soon as Nagato informed me of your call. How are you faring?" He said, looking the man up and down, and certainly not seeming pleased.

"Uh. I'm.. alive. So..." he finally forced out, staring after the group walking away. He turned back again, baffled completely. "Why is Neji here?"

Itachi smiled softly and started walking toward the building in the distance, guiding the pitiful man along with him. "Everything will be explained in due time."

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**A/N-**

**Wheeeeeelllll I think that's a decent stopping point.**

**ALRIIGHT! This chapter was so fun, I missed doing fight scenes, even though they're fucking hard as fuck. And kuzu vs Shika. So many possibilities. Dei needs to shut his mouth though, gawd... Distracting Shika like that... he's such a dick. In case you haven't noticed, they're not fond of each other. He**

also doesn't like the Uchiha's either, as in the anime. But now it's not so much burning hatred as much as just general dislike.

And also, WOOT! Reunion time! Saucy's jelly. xD

Sweet. So Next chap... I don't have planned out but I'm going to start immediatly. Lol, or else I'd tell you what to expect. It's a good thing i don't though, because my chapters never go exactly as planned. Lol fellow writers would understand.

Hey that rhymed.

ANYWHAY!

Ignore typos, I apologize. I swear I'm trying to pay closer attention. And don't forget to review, my beautiful, wonderful, sexy readers.

O.O What? Sexy? Nuthin...

Love you guys! Till next time!

# In times of doubt

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## Come What May

After they were all sat down around the small card table, Itachi finally took a moment to look around. Shikamaru was seated beside him, and Neji would have been on his other side had Sasuke not forced himself between. Then sat Kakuzu, Deidara, and Sasori Next to Itachi, completing the circle.

"My.. I did not realize this place had gotten so... neglected.." He said in his soft voice.

"No one did, it hasn't been used in many years." Sasori replied.  
"Anyway, care to fill us all in?"

"I believe I'd like to hear the complete account of events first. I got only the bare minimum from Nagato."

"Very well. Shikamaru would you care to explain?"

Shikamaru glanced around the table, and shook his head. He was fed up with having to catch everyone up all the time. He was irritated enough having to have almost the entire Akatsuki here to help him.

"Very well. I'll do it." Sasori then began regaling the tale, mainly to just Itachi, since he was the only one who seemed to be listening.

Sasuke, meanwhile, turned to Shikamaru, not saying a word but speaking volumes with his eyes.

Shikamaru only stared back absently, with maybe the smallest hint of amusement. The younger Uchiha was threatened by him, and though it was annoying, it was funny too. He and Neji's history was over. Yes, it was true that a few of the old feelings had come back upon seeing him, especially after seeing how powerful the Hyuga

had somehow gotten in a mere six months and some days. But they were nothing but distant echoes of what used to be. Neji could never compare to Hidan...

Dear Jashin if someone told him he'd ever feel that way a few years ago he'd have sent them to the insane asylum.

"So... how you doin' Nara?" Sasuke finally said, smirking as usual.

"I've been better Sasuke... I've been a hell of a lot better." He answered honestly, not bothering with the man. If he wanted to make himself look like an idiot, he could go right ahead. He had far too much on his mind to play those kinds of games.

Neji smiled at this response. He hadn't been looking forward to this moment, even though a small part of him had.

"Hn. I hear you're losing it."

"Yeah. I might be."

"Just like that psycho you shaked up with."

"Yup."

"He left your ass didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

"Guess you're just undesirable huh?"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes and gave him a dramatic sigh. "You can cut the shit Sasuke. I understand that you're threatened by me. I mean, I *am* still smarter and now stronger than you, as crazy and undesirable as I am. But that's no reason for us to be enemies. I really don't care that you're with Neji, there's no bad blood between any of us. So quit trying to make your dick look so big. You're just making everything think less of you."

After this, he finally let out a smirk, revelling in Sasuke's shocked and pissed off silence. Neji stifled a laugh over to the side, which only made Shikamaru smile more.

The younger Uchiha pushed himself from his chair, "Where's the bathroom?" he asked whoever was listening. Deidara, out of everyone, pointed him in the right direction, not bothering to mask his own teasing grin.

Neji used the opportunity to shift over to Sasuke's chair. He cleared his throat awkwardly, trying to think of something not-stupid to say, before Shikamaru saved him the trouble.

"You look good."

"Thanks.." he said, glancing away and then back. "You... don't really.. Are you okay?"

"No, not really. I'm better now though. Hopefully with Itachi here we can actually *do* something instead of sitting around."

Neji twisted his hands around each other for a bit, brows creasing again. "Yeah.. he's everyone's hero huh?"

"He just knows Hidan better than anyone else." Shikamaru said, catching the look Kakuzu shot him, but ignoring it. "He's always been the best at controlling him."

"I see..." Neji said, still wringing his hands. "So.. you and... and Hidan... You really do like him don't you?"

Shikamaru studied the Hyuga, who noted the terrible bags under his eyes and how thin he looked, despite still being relatively muscular. "Yes... It's hard to explain.."

"No, I uh.. I can understand... Sasuke, uh, he's kind of.."

"A tool?"

" *No!* Not a tool. I mean he's just like. You know, not my type. But.. still.. it.. you know, makes him more.."

"Of a tool?" Shikamaru said, holding back a chuckle. He hadn't actually laughed a real laugh in what felt like years. Usually it was just the maniacal laughter he couldn't control when he was in a fight. It felt wrong to be joyous, he'd been depressed for so long.

" *No!* He's not a tool. He's had a really crappy life, Shikamaru. Cut him some slack."

"And so has Hidan."

Neji was silent for a moment, the only sound in the room being Sasori's monotone voice regaling the details of all that had happened.

"That's true, huh? You never really know until you actually know.." He said, unable to help his quick glance at Itachi, who was immersed in Sasori's story-telling. "But, I mean, aside from this... how have you been?" He finished lamely.

Shikamaru looked at him, saying it all without words. "I've been through hell and back probably about six times now." He said despite. "And you?"

"Good, good." Neji said, wishing he wasn't acting like such an idiot. "Sasuke and Itachi have been helping me train and get stronger. I've got a lot of new techniques, and I don't have to rely on the Byakugan so heavily now."

"Yeah I saw you earlier. You held your own pretty well against Kakuzu, not many people can do that."

Again Kakuzu turned his attention away from his fellow Akatsuki members at the mention of his name. And again Shikamaru ignored him.

"Itachi told me to put my training to the test. I thought you guys were fighting or I probably would've been torched..."

Shikamaru considered this while Neji fidgeted nervously. He supposed he could take it as a compliment, but Neji's behavior was bothering him. He couldn't really pinpoint what could make him act this way.

"Itachi jumped us a mile or so away," he continued on, "And we could feel the ground quaking and he said it was you and Kakuzu fighting. We got closer and I heard you yell something, I thought you two were really going at it. I think I was wrong. " He laughed lightly, "But Itachi told me I should go break it up, I didn't really argue, because I was worried maybe you were having another fit, you know. So I jumped in, I thought maybe that was you on the ground with that thing attacking you.."

"Yeah, I was about to win, you messed me up." Shikamaru said, forcing a smile to show his teasing intent. Neji smiled back.

"The match was far from over." Kakuzu finally said, making Neji jump and twist his head around.

Shikamaru looked at the man in interest. "Nah, I was winning."

"I believe we were fairly matched."

"Tch, believe what you want, old man. Won't make it true."

Neji again turned back to stare at Shikamaru in shock, speaking to Kakuzu that way. Last he'd known his ex not only hated the man, but was still somewhat terrified of him. To see them going back and forth like this it was like... well, it was almost like he had taken Hidan's place. This was a troubling thought, though he told himself it shouldn't bother him.

Shikamaru wasn't his anymore, he'd accepted that long ago, but... everything was changing too fast.



"So you really wanted to come see me? Or did they drag you along?" Shikamaru changed the subject, bringing the Hyuga out of his daze.

"Uh, yeah, well... it's complicated..." He said, putting a stray bit of hair behind his ear. "We didn't actually know what he was doing until we were already halfway here."

"We? You mean Sasuke."

"Yeah." Neji said, looking more trouble than a second ago.

"Shikamaru..." He said quietly, "Do you know anyone named Orochimaru?"

The spikey haired man shook his head, but his eyes flicked to the man sitting behind Neji who had become interested in their conversation again.

"Well. It's a long story with a lot of explaining, but, Sasuke has this curse mark on him that Orochimaru put there. It's been acting up lately, and Itachi mentioned something about it possibly relating to this mission. He didn't say anything more other than the one comment, I thought maybe you could fill me in."

This was all news to the Jashinist, who's eyes had gone a little distant in thought. Neji waited patiently until he seemed to come back to reality. "Hm.. I don't know anything about it." He said, gaze flicking over to Itachi and Sasori. "Hopefully they'll finish up soon and he can explain and I can finally have some fucking answers."

Almost on que, the redhead and Uchiha turned back toward the table, Itachi looking slightly unsettled and Sasori... just looked like Sasori.

"Where has my brother gone to?" Itachi said Immediately.

"Bathroom." Deidara answered with a rude tone. "So hurry up and tell us where the idiot is so we can go get him and I can go home,

yeah?" The blonde leaned back in his seat, pushing the chair to balance on two legs.

"I would prefer my brother be here. I fear it may involve him as well."

The silent question floated around to room, but no one actually asked it.

"I'll uh, I'll go get him.." Neji finally said, slipping away silently.

Shikamaru watched him go for a minute and turned back to the Uchiha. "So why is he here again?" He nodded his head in the direction that his ex had just gone.

"To help lend moral support and progress his training." Itachi said stoically.

Shikamaru didn't buy that.

"Why is he *really* here? He told me you think Orochimaru has something to do with this. Is that true?" He said, not bothering to explain that he had no idea who that was seeing as all the Akatsuki members suddenly seemed to snap to attention. Apparently he was a popular guy.

"As I said, I would prefer my brother to be here..."

"Bah, You can catch him up later, hm. Just get on with it already! We've been waiting around here for weeks, hm!" Deidara interjected, waving his hand. Sasori cast a glare at him but he merely shrugged in response, sitting too far away to be hit by the wooden man.

Itachi sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, but went on none-the-less. "I have a theory, as most of you know, Sasuke was victim to Orochimaru's genetic tinkering. The curse mark on his shoulder has lain dormant for two years with absolutly no altercations, since the day I believed to have killed Orochimaru. But it's become active again, just on the way here his body was nearly taken over by the

beast as he tried to resist Orochimaru's manipulation." he paused to turn to Shikamaru. "You stated to Sasori that one of the men who tried to capture you's name was Juugo, and another was Kimimaro."

Shikamaru Nodded. "That's what I heard one of his men say when they were stuffing me into a bag."

"Yes. Well, it so happens that those two men are both underlings of Orochimaru, Juugo himself also being victim to genetic experimentation. "

The Nara's eyes narrowed at this news. Well that pretty much solved *that* puzzle, except for one thing. "There was another group of people before them, four women and a man. I know at least one of the girls was a Jashinist, or pretending to be, she had a tattoo of the circle on her. And the man pretended to be Hidan."

Itachi nodded, having already been informed of this information via Sasori. "Yes, I'm not positive of that bunch, but it's very possible they may have simply been posing, as you said, to lure you into a trap."

"Well, they did a shitty fucking job of it." Shikamaru muttered. Leaning back in his chair, he let his eyes meander over his little army gathered around the pathetic card table. He noticed something when his gaze landed on Kakuzu, thought he wasn't sure if he was actually seeing it. He was a little thrown off by the fact that he would even notice such a small thing in the man he hated with every fiber of his being, but then again, they'd been around each other enough recently.

Kakuzu seemed a little... troubled. As opposed to a few moments ago when the older man had been switching back and forth between conversations, he seemed to have completely zoned out now, his christmas-colored eyes looking over in itachi's directions but unmistakeably glazed over, as if he were having some daydream or something.

He nulled it over for a few minutes as Deidara piped up with some stupid comment and Itachi gave an annoyed response. And then was drawn back to the conversation.

"Shikamaru."

"Huh?" He turned back to the others to see them staring at him expectantly.

"Do you think that's a possibility?" Itachi stated blandly, already aware of the fact that the immortal had not been paying attention.

"Uh... Repeat the question?" he said sheepishly, and Deidara rolled his eyes.

"Jeez kid this isn't school, we're trying to figure out how to save you two's little boy-toy hm? Quit daydreaming about each other!"

"Just tell me what you fucking said!" The Nara said, glancing uneasily at Kakuzu, who's eyes had snapped back to normal.

"He stated that this poor attempt to trick you was most likely a bunch of disposable pawns sent out to see what you were capable of." Kakuzu said, acting as if nothing had ever happened and ignoring the blonde's comment completely.

The immortal and the mostly-immortal exchanged stares for a moment before Shika's dark eyes flicked to meet Itachi's, who seemed to have picked up on the old man's subtle, strange behavior.

"Yeah.. that's definitely a possibility. So you think maybe this Orochimaru guy is behind the whole thing?"

"I believe the circumstances fit together far too well for it to be coincidental."

"Okay so who the hell is he then?"

"Someone that no living soul should ever have the misfortune to meet." Itachi said with a sigh. "Unfortunately, it seems you'll get to. It makes perfect sense, really. He's been working on a way to obtain immortality as long as anyone can remember."

"What I don't understand..." Sasori said in a slightly thoughtful tone. "Is how he found out about you and Hidan at all. I can guarantee that no one in our organization has said a word."

"I know that Sasuke has not spoken of it at all. And the only other soul that knows of it is Hidan himself and.."

"And me." Neji's voice said from behind Shikamaru.

Half of the group turned to face him, standing next to an agitated and yet bored looking Sasuke. There was a restless sort of quiet that settled over the room as Neji looked emotionlessly at everyone, finally settling on Shikamaru.

"And I haven't told anyone either." The two stared at each other for an extended period of time, both seeming to try to get some message across, but unable to. Sasuke, witnessing this, was grinding his teeth together, but remaining blessedly silent.

"Well someone had to Yeah!?" Deidara finally exclaimed. "I mean me and Sasori didn't even know all the fine detail about this crap until we started on this dumb mission. So really it's amongst you five!"

"Don't be an idiot, barbie-doll." Sasuke snapped, making the bright blue eyes of Deidara zero in on him. "No one had to have said anything. That shitstain has other methods of getting information. It doesn't matter if no one said a word, he could literally pluck the information out of your brain if he really wanted to."

"So what you little pissant? Are you saying he used you're disgusting *brand* to get what he needed, hm?"

"Watch your fucking mouth, blonde."

"Sasuke." Itachi said softly, distracting them both with just the tone of his voice. Sasuke's dark eyes slowly shifted to meet Itachi's. "Is that a possibility?"

Sasuke didn't answer for the longest time, making Shikamaru's face darken to a mix of anger and betrayal. Neji saw this and looked desperately to his boyfriend, trying to silently will him to tell them it wasn't true. Not only for Shikamaru's sake, but for Sasuke's. The poor man did not need anymore shit to deal with that was no fault of his own.

"No." He finally said, pulling out the chair he'd originally been sitting in and plopping back down. "I don't think so. I've resisted him this far. Unless he actually *gets* control, he can't tap into my head. He got it from somewhere else."

Neji visibly relaxed, giving Shikamaru a tired smile that wasn't returned. The Nara wasn't paying any attention to him at all now, it seemed. He was too busy glaring down Sasuke.

"Well." Itachi finally said, standing up. "Regardless of *how* he managed to claim it, the problem that remains to be dealt with is how to find him, rescue Hidan, and put a stop to his madness, once and for all."

"I've got an idea, hm." Deidara said again, giving Sasuke a malicious look. "Why don't we dangle the pretty-boy out on a string and see if the fucker shows up, yeah?"

"Shut your insolent mouth, brat." Sasori snapped. "This is no time for your pitiful rivalry."

"He may have a point." Kakuzu said again, sending every pair of eyes in the room both glaring at and questioning him. He turned to study Sasuke for a moment. "This curse mark he holds, what are the details of it?"

"We will *not* be using my little brother as bait." Itachi said quickly, just the slightest furrowing of his forehead to signal his discontent.

"On the contrary. If Orochimaru can possess his body and tap into his mind, you could perform a genjutsu on him, could you not?"

Neji gasped. "And trick him into leading us right to him!"

"Us?" Shikamaru said. "You're not going, have you forgotten that it's Hidan we're rescuing here? You two don't get along so well."

Neji scoffed at him. "Oh come on. You said there was no reason for us to kill each other any more, it'll be fine."

"Neji." The Nara said seriously, "I'm happy to see you, and you've improved a lot. But I'm not comfortable with you coming. Hidan is unpredictable, Jashin may not want your soul anymore but he had a vendetta against you. There's no way of knowing how he'll react."

Neji stared at him, disheartened now. "But.. what the hell am I supposed to do? Just stay here alone and wait for you guys?"

"Deidara can fly you home."

"Hey I didn't fucking volunteer for that, hm."

"I'm not going home! I came this far, there's not fucking way I'm just going to go back. Besides this isn't all about the psycho either. Sasuke has unfinished business with the bastard and I'm going to help him carry it out."

Sasuke snorted. "C'mon Princess. You're stronger and all but if Itachi can't take him down, what the hell makes you think you can?"

"Who's side are you on!" Neji nearly shrieked, standing suddenly from his chair to hover over his bastard of a boyfriend.

"Well Jesus Neji! Just because you get to come with us you suddenly think you're some badass! I fucking hate every stupid cell

in that bastards body but I'm not fucking stupid enough to underestimate him!"

"I can't believe this. Who's next huh? Itachi? Are *you* gonna tell me I can't come even though it was your idea for me to come in the first place!?" he whirled to glare at the elder Uchiha as he raged.

Itachi patiently withstood his berations and merely stared at the Hyuga calmly until he had quieted his rant to a soft panting.

"Actually, I'm siding with you on this one." He said quietly, which of course made Sasuke and Shikamaru inevitably team up to attempt to glare him into submission.

He only considered them as stoically as everything else. "You may not remember correctly, brother, but I had quite a bit of trouble trying to keep that man from taking control of you while also fighting the beasts corruption. Neji here was the one who took control of the situation and free'd you from both. If we were to actually go about pulling off this idea Kakuzu has come up with, we're going to need someone who can pull you back from that condition without harming you." he explained, leaving the room speechless and staring at Neji with interest.

"I think, considering the large number of elite persons we have recruited on this case, Neji should be fine. He is volunteering just as the rest of us are and fully understands the dangers." His intense gaze flicked to the brunette. "Isn't that right?"

Neji nodded forcefully.

"This is shit." Sasuke said, pushing himself to his feet as well. "I don't know why you're all just *assuming* I'll let you use me like that. Did it ever occur to you that I don't *want* that nasty fucker in my head?"

"We have no other options, boy. Sit your ass down and quit crying about it." Kakuzu said sternly, giving Sasuke such a deep glare that the Uchiha was pushed back into his seat from it. "I've sat back and listened to your and everyone else's insufferable complaints long



enough. Each and every one of you came here knowing damn well what we were going to be doing. You had every chance to wash your hands of it, and you didn't. If I hear one more asinine remark about Hidan or the plan..." His voice had gone so low with threat that he didn't even have to finish the sentence. This left the room in a heavy silence for the umpteenth time, and it was broken yet again by Itachi's soft voice.

"I understand where you're coming from Sasuke." He said, face drooping in exhaustion. "But you of all people know of how clever Orochimaru can be. I only managed to find him before through months upon months of preparation. We do not have that kind of time. Unless you might have any other ideas, this is our only lead, and thus our only option."

Sasuke glared back and forth between his brother and Kakuzu, a flash of something that looked close to desperation shimmered in his eyes before he silently rose to his feet. "Fine. I'll do it." He said robotically, then walked away.

Shikamaru looked at Neji blankly, who didn't give any glances in return. He simply stared dejectedly after Sasuke for a few beats until whirling back around to the elder sibling.

"When will we be doing this?"

"Everything considering, I would imagine we have no choice but to wait until Orochimaru decides to attempt another take-over."

"There's no way to do it sooner?" Neji said, pale eyes overflowing with a sad concern.

"Unless someone can think of a way to draw him in without giving away our intentions, we must wait." Itachi said, dismissing the conversation with his tone.

Neji considered this in melancholy silence for awhile, then he got up and strode quickly after his boyfriend without a sound.

Shikamaru had leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms shortly after Itachi had voiced his intent to let Neji tag along. He remained in that pose still, not-quite-glaring but not just staring at Itachi. The man had never done anything he disagree'd with so strongly before to cause him to feel such contempt. He absolutely did not want Neji going. Not only because of Hidan, but because of the brunettes horrible habit of getting himself into trouble that always ended up with the Nara having to do something insanely drastic to get him out.

"In the meantime..." Itachi sighed, leaning forward onto the table in an unmasked show of fatigue. "I don't want any more sparring matches. I understand that one might get restless, but we need to have every ounce of our strength and chakra at our disposal when the time comes."

"Hey now, who put *you* in charge, hm?" Deidara finally spoke up. "I think if anything it should be Kakuzu that leads this little quest. *He's* Hidan's boyfriend after all, yeah." He shot Shikamaru a dirty look at the last bit.

The Nara only grit his teeth and closed his eyes tightly, reopening them slowly.

*"Kill... Kill... Kill."*

"That's an excellent point, Deidara. Kakuzu, would you like to take command?" Itachi said all-too-plesantly.

"If I did that then half of this group would be dead already." Kakuzu said curtly, pushing to his feet. "Notify me if anything changes, other than that I don't want to be bothered until further notice."

The four remaining men watched him walk away.

"Wait.. He didn't even answer!" Deidara exclaimed.

"Do I need to explain to you in detail the meaning of ' *Shut Up*' brat?" Sasori growled. The blonde flinched away and solemnly shook his

head, and the puppet-man turned back to Itachi. "I will also be in my room. Come if you need me." With that he got up and left, grabbing Deidara by the elbow and nearly making him fall from his chair and he roughly pulled him along. "And *you* will be going to yours since you can't seem to mind your manners." He muttered to a struggling but silent blonde.

This left only Itachi and Shikamaru and the quiet nesting between them.

"Shikamaru, I apologize for putting you in this situation. However, it is necessary." The sharingan user admitted.

"So is that why he's here or do you have some sort of ulterior motive?" Shikamaru said roughly, actually surprising the other. "Because honestly I'm getting really fucking sick of people *fucking* with my relationships."

Itachi regarded him quizzically for a few moments before answering. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine. Don't change the subject."

"You're not acting yourself."

"I'm acting *perfectly* myself. Since when did you become a fucking expert on me? *Answer* the damn *question*. "

Again he studied the man for a long while. Shikamaru stayed still in that position, ready to wait years if he had to. He was tired of cryptic answers and mystery. If he was forced to wait here with a group of people that the majority of hated him, he was damn well going to get whatever the hell he wanted out of it.

"Originally.." he finally started. "I only proposed the idea to dissuade Sasuke from coming with me. It did not work, and then Neji helped me immeasurably during one of Sasuke's fits, and his value on this mission has only risen since then. He possesses the ability to banish

the demented chakra that turns Sasuke into a mindless killing machine, and also has the ability to remain level-headed in an intense situation. His fighting style is a unique one, different by far than any of ours, and this increases our chances of being to defeat Orochimaru. I promise you, Shikamaru, I had no intention to torture you with his presence. I was under the impression that you two had cut all ties to each other."

"Thank you." The Jashinist said, much softer now, though his gaze was still hard. "That's all I wanted. It doesn't bother me that he's here, I just..." He trailed off, trying to figure out the correct way to word his feelings on the subject without crossing any lines.

"Worry for his health. " Itachi finished for him. "As do the rest of us acquainted with him. I understand. Neji Hyuga has been through a lot, and instead of breaking down has instead used the broken pieces to build himself up into an outstanding person. He is no longer some meek damsel capable only of getting into trouble, I have seen to that personally. We are all apprehensive about this, Shikamaru Nara, but we are all grown men, capable of making our own choices."

The spikey haired man pondered on all of this for a good long while. Itachi was correct in everything he said, as usual. There were no holes he could punch in his explanation, but he still had the absolute worst feeling about this.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you..." He finally sighed, "Ever since Hidan showed back up in my life... things haven't been easy.."

*I love you...*

He clenched his eyes shut.

*It hurts so much...*

Yes, it did hurt. It hurt terribly. He didn't know how much longer he could stand it. It was eating away at him, killing him slowly, it felt like.

If only he could die.

*" Kill him..."*

His eyes snapped open again when a hand was once again placed gently on his shoulders. He looked up into the dark, signature black eyes of the Uchiha.

"You are one of the strongest people I've ever had the chance to meet, Shikamaru. I've not told you that, but it's true." Itachi said, eyes looking slightly teary. This threw the Nara for a bit of a loop, thought the gesture was not unappreciated.

"Only one other man has gone through what you have already, and continue to. Sometimes I honestly believe your experience may be horrible even moreso than his. Your God may be a cruel one but I don't believe even he would let such determined suffering go unrewarded. Just keep your faith."

Shikamaru could only nod in response. Really, who in the right minds could ever be mad at Itachi? He always knew what to say, and he was *always* there to help when it was needed.

"I don't have a choice..." He chuckled, rewarded with one of the Older Uchiha's rare smiles before the man gave his shoulder a couple pats and turned to walk off the same direction everyone else had gone.

"Try to get some rest. I know waiting is not something you Jashinists are good at, but it's all we can do." He said, before he was gone.

Shikamaru sat alone at the table, trying to sort out the war of emotions within him. He had what he'd wanted all along now, answers, and hope. But he couldn't seem to be glad about it. Shadowing all the rest of the emotions was a terrible sense of dread, something horrible was going to happen when they went to rescue Hidan. He could get this much understanding from it. But he couldn't place what it was.

And this was more troublesome than anything. There were any number of possibilities as to what it could be, though the one that scared him the most, the one he didn't want to think about, was the only one that wouldn't seem to leave his head.

What if Hidan was dead when they got there? What if, somehow, they found a way not to just leech his immortality, but to steal it completely?

He didn't care about what might happen to the rest of the world if this Orochimaru person obtained such a gift. He didn't care so much even that all his comrades were in danger of losing his life. He could not seem to squeeze anything else into his brain when it was so filled with that one question.

What if he was dead?

He sighed, massaging his temples. Well, he supposed he ought to go back to his meditation again before he lost his mind again. Jashin knows he could use a little peace and serenity right now...

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**A/N-**

Whew. Don't you hate those chapters where absolutely nothing happens, but at the same time sooooo much happens that you're bouncing in your seat wishing Wierdo would shut the hell up with this author's note and get started on the next chapter so you can read it ASAP?

Yeah. You know what I'm talking about.

Okay soooo! I really have no idea how many chapters are left. I sincerely wish I could find all the fucking plans I made. But alas, they have been sucked into the black hole that lurks around my house. You've probably noticed that the chapters have been a bit short since I've come back. Or maybe you haven't. But now you know.

AND KNOWLEDGE IS POWER!

Ahem. Anyway. Yes, I've been making them shorter purposefully to help extend the story, because at the moment I have the ending all well and planned out, as well as the climax and the HOLYFUCKINGSHIT moment. But everything between that has pretty well been left to whatever pops into my head while I'm writing. I know I was originally wanting to make this one longer than the last, but I don't know right now if that's going to happen or not.

Not saying I'm getting bored with this story or anything, but I'd like to go ahead and decrease the insane number of one-shot ideas building up in my head. These multi-chapters are a bitch, y'know?

Meh. But anyway, hopefully everything is starting to add up for those of you still reading. But at the same time you're hopefully still completley oblivious until the very end. Or else I think I may have failed as a writer.

So, forgive all the typos, please, for the love of Jashin, I don't care who you are, what you have to say, whether you liked it or not, just please, please, take just a megar five seconds of your day to leave me a review. I haven't gotten too many since I've restarted this story and it's terribly discouraging. I don't want to lose the few loyal followers I've earned.

I love you guys, seriously.

'Till next chapter!

~Wierdo.

# Encrypted

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## Come What May

Shikamaru lay in his bed, his head resting on the pillow with his arms both held up to fold the stained sides of the loosley fluffed fabric over his ears.

He stared at the ceiling, wide-eyed but in absolute silence.

Sleep wouldn't come tonight, it seemed.

Hundreds and hundreds of different things Hidan had said were flooding his mind at the same time in hushed whispers. He laid quietly in horror, body tensed and shaking with the strain of trying to somehow physically push the mental torture away.

*Keep your faith.* Itachi says.

So loud, so fucking loud but so quiet. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. He was still well aware of what was happening around him, outside his mind. everyone he knew was here, sleeping away peacefully in each of their little rooms on their disgusting, grimey mattresses. If he screamed they would all come running, and what would they do? What *could* they do?

*Jashin... please... I'm begging you...* He said in his own mind, somehow still able to hear his own thoughts with the many voices of his love and soulmate echoing and bouncing around. Every single thing the man had ever said, things that made sense, things that didn't. Half-sentences, half-words, random noises, laughs, cheers, whoops.

He stared at the ceiling, so perfectly still that he wasn't sure if he were even breathing. He didn't even care if he was or not. He wanted to die, he wanted to kill himself, to grab something and



shove it through his head just so he could pass out and escape this *ungodly fucking noise!*

*I'll do anything...* He cried inwardly, his eyes actually fogging up with tears. *Stop it. Just stop it. Leave me alone...*

He clenched the pillow tighter around his head, unknowingly biting down on his own lip so hard that he bit completely through it.

There had to be a way to stop it. He had to decode the message, but what was it? There was nothing! It was a senseless garble of unintelligible nonsense!

*YOU PINEAPPLE HEADED FUCK! - Got him for you - FUCKING - HURRY THE FUCK UP AND KILL HIM, - I love you -Don't think you know- not even- KAKUZU! - DAMN - You really - another Jashinist's - WAKE THE FUCK UP!- DIRTY BITCH- GODDAMN UCHIHA!- not even - make sense - REAL! - SON OF A BITCH - KILL YOU - DON'T FUCK WITH ME! - sick of your shit -GODDAMN UCHIHA! - Tolerate that shit from Kuzu - our lord and savior - do it yourself -PINEAPPLE HEADED - hurts so bad - act like you didn't like it - nasty - goddamn - something planned - don't get cocky - FUCKING KILL YOU! - don't really remember - don't even try- you think you're - took you so long? -like some little- know who- SON OF A BITCH KAKUZU! - You still think I'm stupid - MOTHERFUCKER! - Pineapple head...*

*I saw my blood and... it calmed me down...*

Liquid pennies flooded his mouth as suddenly, with no other warning, it stopped, leaving a small ringing in the Nara's ears. His eyes, still saucers, stared still at that one spot for a minute, afraid that if he did anything at all, it might come back.

Hesitantly, they flicked to another area of the ceiling. When the silence continued on, he made the conscious effort to take in a breath. Air whooshed into his lungs, seeming loud in the suffocatingly heavy atmosphere.

There was nothing, no noise what-so-ever.

He heavily let out his breath, letting his arms flop down onto the mattress beside him. Something warm ran down his chin, and he lifted his hand again to wipe it away. His fingers came off a dark crimson, and suddenly he realized he was bleeding heavily through the hole in his bottom lip.

He only stared absently at his fingers, unable to process any thoughts at the moment other than the fact that it was so wonderfully quiet in here, he could almost fall asleep...

Then something thumped outside his door, and he heard a whispered swear word.

Gaze now resting calmly on the door, thoughts finally started trickleing back into him, and he pushed himself up to a sitting position, eyes never leaving the closed door.

*It had to mean something..* He told himself, while simultaneously scooting off the mattress so he could stand up. *But what? What the hell could that gibberish mean?*

He turned the handle, having resolved not to lock it anymore since it took so damn long to undo, and gently slid the door open toward him. He was greeted only by the darkness, which he regarded emotionlessly, his thought process still only barely working. The surreal feeling was back, as if he weren't really here, as if this weren't really happening.

It was a peaceful, calm kind of feeling, the kind he used to get a lot when he used to smoke pot. He felt distant from himself, from his problems. His body seemed to move on it's own, leaning forward to peek out into the hall and scan each direction.

There was no one there...

*Probably just someone going to the bathroom...* his sleep deprived mind reasoned.

*Speaking of which...* He yawned, distantly thinking that that was a wonderful thing. He was tired, he was actually tired! Which meant maybe he could actually sleep tonight!

Stepping into the hall, he again scanned his surroundings, sensing little blurbs of chakra in each of the occupied rooms on either side of him as he walked barefooted down the old, dusty, uninsulated carpet. *One... two.. three..*

He swayed slightly as he trudged along, laughing a little bit at the thought of living with the Akatsuki, Sasuke, and Neji. What a fuckin' sitcom that would be...

*Four... five... fiiive...*

He stopped, blinking heavily with brows furrowing, his turned to the left, as if that would somehow help him sense the missing chakra better. Someone was missing, not in their room. This didn't alarm him really, seeing as he'd just reasoned that someone had got up to go to the bathroom. But he didn't know who was in which room, and he really didn't want to run into a grumpy Sasuke in the middle of the night.

His brain finally seemed to click on, his dull eyes sharpened a bit as he realized something. The room Shikamaru picked was the southernmost one, all the rest of the occupied rooms were to the north of his. All that was south of his room was an empty hallway, some kind of janitorial office, and more empty rooms. The only reason someone would be walking past his door is if they didn't know where they were going...

He turned to look back the way he came. Being in a warehouse as they all were, the only windows were small, up high, and heavily covered with cobwebs and years of dust and grime. Moonlight didn't

really get through them too well, and didn't offer any more sight than a bare minimum.

*Who would be wondering around in the middle of the night?*

Surely not any of the Akatsuki... they didn't seem like the type to boredly wonder around. Neither did Sasuke...

*Neji maybe?*

Hm. Maybe, he recalled many nights those few years ago when he'd wake up to find the brunette out in the livingroom watching some sappy movie with a bowl of popcorn or tub of ice cream, claiming to be unable to sleep.

He smiled for a moment. Ah... the old days.. he never really thought about them any more, usually there was too much on his mind, far too much. Usually Hidan.. And speaking of Hidan.

He turned around and continued slowly and silently down the hall, trying to replay what Hidan's disembodied voice had been screaming at him, only on a lower volume level. It was a moot point though, there was no way to interpret it, seeing as he couldn't even remember exactly what had been said.

Something about Uchiha... and Kakuzu had been mentioned a couple times...

His lip was beginning to throb, and with a sigh he washed his hands of it, content enough just for the agonizing moment to be over with. It was just a bunch of mumbo-jumbo, same as all the rest of the voices he kept hearing. It wasn't real, it had no meaning.

Right? Just his subconscious mind trying to fill Hidan's absence...

"What the fucking hell!?" Someone said, Snapping the Nara to attention and making him freeze in place.

He wasn't far from the bathroom, which meant he must've been correct in his assumptions. But that had sounded like Sasuke... and he really didn't want to have to deal with that bastard.

"If someone doesn't show up and start fucking explaining shit..." Sasuke's voice continued, confusing Shikamaru as he contemplated just going to the kitchen and peeing in the sink. No.. he needed to clean the blood off himself or the others would flip out in the morning when they saw it, and he needed a mirror to do that.

Loud footsteps started coming toward him, growing faster and faster, as if the younger Uchiha had started running.

"HEY!" he shouted, Making shikamaru jump and twist to his left just before he was tackled full-on to the ground. His head smashed into the carpeted but still rock-hard floor and he saw stars for a minute, keeping him from shoving the bastard off in the angry fit he was in now.

"I see you fucker! Now who the fuck are you?" Sasuke said, leaning his face in so close that when the Jashinists eyes finally refocused he was staring point blank into an active pair of sharingan.

"SHIT!" He half-yelled, slapping his hand onto Sasuke's face and shoving him off. "What the hell are you doing!?" He said, sitting up to glare at the man who'd fallen flat on his back and was struggling to get up. "Are you on fucking drugs? What the hell are you doing?" he asked again.

Finally Sasuke scrambled to his hands and knees and turned around, eyes squinted as if he were having trouble seeing. Then they popped open wide. "Pineapple head..." He whispered.

Shikamaru's body locked up, and he scooted back in stunned silence before his eyes narrowed in anger. "That's not fucking funny Sasuke. I told you I had no problem with you but if you're going to keep being a fucking tool-"

He was cut off as he was tackled again, and before he could even react there were hands feeling his face and pinching his skin and pulling at his hair.

"No way. There's no way this is really you. It's another hallucination, it's gotta be..." Sasuke whispered, running his hands everywhere. "Jashin fucking Christ these things are getting so real..."

Finally snapping out of his shocked daze, Shikamaru once again shoved the man off of him, pushing with added chakra this time to send him tumbling down the hall. "GET THE HELL OFF ME!" He shouted, knowing full well that everyone else in the establishment would probably have heard that and be either waking up or fully awake and on the way to investigate. "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU!?" He shouted again, sending out a mental S.O.S. for someone to turn on the fucking lights.

"WILL YOU QUIT FUCKING SHOVING ME AROUND! Damn why the hell are you suddenly so strong?" Sasuke shouted right back, sitting up and rubbing his neck with his head tilted.

"STOP TALKING LIKE THAT!" Shikamaru said, pushing quickly to his feet. "I'm about fucking sick of your shit, seriously. I don't care who the fuck your brother is I'll still beat the shit out of you!"

"What the hell are you *talking* about!?" Sasuke said back, taking the same stance. "Goddammit isn't there anyone else in this dream I can talk you, you piss me the fuck off you Pineapple headed fuck!"

"DON'T FUCKING CALL ME THAT!" The Nara all but screeched, taking off in a dead run toward the man and pushing chakra into his fist. Sasuke's eyes widened and he turned to run, tripping over nothing and making a faceplant into the floor.

"Goddammit FUCK this stupid dream! I hate this shit!" he shouted, flipping onto his back afterward and then holding his hand over his face protectively as Shikamaru readied for the strike.

He suddenly slammed into a shimmering light-blue wall of light, hearing a disgusting crack and a terrible pain in his nose before he was knocked backward onto his ass.

"Shikamaru! What the hell!" Neji cried, running past him and helping Sasuke to his feet. The younger Uchiha immediately gave Neji a hard shove once he was up again, pushing the Hyuga into the wall.

"Whoa, hey Princess, don't you fucking touch me." He said darkly, then hesitating for a moment and leaning closer with eyes slightly squinted again. "Wait... why in the name of Jashin are *you* here? You're never in these things..."

"Sasuke..." Neji said softly, clutching his shoulder. "What... what are you talking about? Are you okay?" His features were set in concern for only a second before they shifted to anger. "Are you fucking *drunk* again!? Seriously? You can't even go *one night*?"

Sasuke's face twisted in confusion, and he began to say something before the lights suddenly whirled on. Shikamaru said a small thank you while holding a hand over his heavily bleeding nose a millisecond before the Sharingan user suddenly roared and doubled over, clutching at his eyes.

"Oh DAMMIT! SON OF A DIRTY BITCH! Shut those fucking things off! Fucking hell that hurts!"

"Sasuke!" Neji cried, running to comfort the man and being shoved away once again.

"I said don't fucking touch me you stupid little bitch! Dammit what the hell is *wrong* with you people!? Do you not understand English! Damn!" he said, not uncovering his eyes.

"What's going on here?" Itachi's voice said, making his younger brother turn to squint at him while still bent over. The Sharingan gone from his eyes.

"Red-eyes?"

Itachi stopped suddenly to give Sasuke a strange look, not even bothering to try and hide his emotions as usual.

"Stop fucking talking like Hidan you shithole!" Shikamaru called in a slightly nasally voice.

More footsteps sounded off the arrival of the rest of the crew.

"I swear if you two children are bickering again..." Kakuzu growled, coming to stand beside Itachi. "You're both going to die."

"No kidding, hm. It's three in the fucking morning I finally got to sleep-"

Sasuke's eyes went wide in the midst of Deidara's complaining and he bolted toward the older man. "KAKUZU OH THANK JASHIN!" He wailed, slamming into the brick wall of a man and wrapping his hands around him. "Someone who can fucking make sense of this crazy batshit! Holy hell I've never been so glad to see your wrinkled old ass!"

Kakuzu raised his hands up out of Sasuke's reach and looked around respectively at Itachi, Neji, and Shikamaru. The last having mentally slap himself not to burst out laughing at the uncharacteristic look of absolute and utter confusion on the man's face.

"Is this real?" Sasuke whined. "I can't fucking tell if this is real. It feels real but I can't fucking control my body hardly at all and they're all talking to me and the princess keeps touching me with his nasty prissy hands and Pineapple head is yelling at me and *I don't understand what's going oooonn!*" Sasuke wailed dramatically, gripping tightly to Kakuzu's waist.

The old man continued staring flabbergasted down at the Younger Uchiha. Deidara started laughing, tried to stop it, and then just ended up laughing even harder.



Everyone else was just as confused as Kakuzu.

"Sasuke." Itachi said in a strict but somehow still soft tone, putting his hand on his brother's shoulder and forcing him to meet his eyes. "What in the *world* are you doing?"

"STOP CALLING ME SASUKE!" He yelled into Itachi's face, turning to nuzzle the eldest of the group again.

"I'm so fucking *sick* of being fucked with like this!" His voice was muffled by the cloth and flesh he was practically trying to bury himself in. "Someone just wake me up already..." He finally whined pathetically.

Everyone exchanged glances, except for Deidara, who stopped in his snickering to give the pitiful Uchiha an awkward look. "Is he *crying*, hm? What the hell is wrong with him? I thought he was supposed to be the psycho one, yeah?" He said, gesturing to Shikamaru, still holding his nose though the blood had long leaked through his fingers and covered the entire lower half of his face.

Kakuzu was still standing awkwardly, looking back and forth between the Uchiha currently clinging to him and the one regarding him in confusion, silently asking what exactly he was supposed to do in this situation.

"Sasuke..." Neji said softly, having slipped past Shikamaru without him noticing and taken a stance behind his lover. "Why... Why are you acting like Hidan?"

"I'm not fucking *acting* bitch. Stop goddamn calling me Sasuke. How many fucking times do I have to repeat myself with you? Are you seriously goddamn retarded or am I fucking talking in some foreign language?" he pulled his head away from Kakuzu's torso halfway through his rant. "Get the fuck out of my hallucination! Get out! Or do I need to carve it into your fucking flesh for you to understand? PINEAPPLE HEAD CONTROL THIS BITCH, SERIOUSLY!" He called out, eyes refocusing on the Jashinist, still sitting on the floor

with a bloody hand over his face. His eyes widened again before suddenly pushed off of Kakuzu and rushed over to kneel beside him.

"Oh fucking thank Jashin! You're bleeding! Gimme some of that! That'll wake me up!" He reached out toward Shikamaru who frantically reared back and swung, slamming his fist directly into the center of Sasuke's face.

"Shikamaru!" Itachi barked in anger.

"Sasuke!" Neji shrilled.

"Oooh, ouuuch." Deidara said, wincing.

Sasori still hadn't said a single word.

"SON OF A BITCH!" Sasuke shouted, falling back and covering his own face. "Goddamit you stupid-What the hell?! Stop fucking knocking me around! What's wrong with you?"

"Get away from me." Shikamaru said darkly.

Neji had stepped forward but was halted by Itachi, who motioned for everyone to stay put and let this play out.

Sasuke's eyes flicked back and forth between Shikamaru's, getting more and more distressed as each second went by.

"You... you look different. You always look the same.." He said quietly, letting his hand fall away from his nose, which was also bleeding now. "You *a*lways look the same. But you look different... and... and that means..." His eyes fell down to his own hands, when he held palms up, closing and opening them a couple times before turning them over to study them.

"This... isn't my body is it?"

Shikamaru only stared at him, brows still slightly furrowed in determined anger.

"I'm always in my own body at least. So this isn't a dream. But... then.." He turned twisted his upper body around to look at everyone else, studying still-shocked person individually, letting the silence drag on.

Suddenly he turned back around, eyes hard and locked onto Shikamaru, whos heart sped up.

As foreign as it looked on Sasuke, there was no mistaking the perfect alignment of the features. That was Hidan's serious face. No amount of practicing could allow him to do that. The faintest bit of a squint, the nearly invisible downward crook of the corner of his mouth. Every last detail, down to the mischevious glint in the eyes.

It was Hidan. He was almost positive of it.

But... it couldn't be. That was Sasuke. He had Sasuke's chakra signature, Sasuke's sharingan...

Something was terribly, terribly wrong here.

"Hidan...?" He finally choked out, not even caring that his face had gone slack, and eyes fell open wide.

The confusion from all the other men poured out into the air, which seemed to almost vibrate with it. Kakuzu's arms had moved to lay crossed across his chest, christmas eyes narrowed to mere slits. Itachi still had a hand around Neji's arm, flinging his skeptic but studious glances between his 'younger brother' and the immortal.

Neji looked almost as if he were going to faint, and Shikamaru realized suddenly that the Hyuga had activated his byakugan, and was now staring at his boyfriend in terror and disbelief, taking quick, shallow breaths.

"YES!" Sasuke said, entire face lighting up as he half-smiled excitedly. He leaned forward and grabbed both of Shika's shoulders. "Yes, oh fucking hell, finally! Someone's starting to make sense!"

Damn I should have known it would be you. Please, Pineapple head, in the name of our lord and savior, tell me what the FUCK is happening right now!?"

"There's no way.." The Nara whispered, feeling as if maybe he might pass out as well. Surely this was a dream, some weird nightmare. It was definitely different from his usual ones, but at least Hidan wasn't dying in the worst possible way. He would prefer him randomly having Sasuke's body any day.

"QUIT FUCKING STARING AND FUCKING TELL ME!" Sasuke shouted in his face, shaking him roughly.

Shikamaru came somewhat back to his senses and shoved the man away again, although far more gently this time. "I don't *know* what's going on.: He said, blinking hard and almost considering slapping himself to make sure he were awake. "But... I think we need a mirror." No.. he had to be awake, a large portion of the front of his body was covered in blood, his lip had stopped hurting, probably already healed by now, and his nose had stopped bleeding long ago, but it still throbbed in time to each of his quickened heartbeats.

He couldn't help the small side of him that was nearly giddy with excitement. The other half, the logical half, was trying and failing miserably to bitchslap that side back into submission. There really could be no possible way this was real. No way. Shikamaru had seen a lot of crazy, impossible shit in the last few years of his life, but this... this was...

Fuck, there wasn't even a word for how ridiculous it is.

"A mirror. Yeah! Damn, what would I do without'cha Pineapple head! I have to see why my body's being so fucking weird." He rose to his feet, the Nara following soon after.

Neji had gone slack-jaw'd now, looking as if everything he knew and loved had just been slaughtered right in front of him, but still concious. He did take a large step backward as 'Sasuke' turned to

look at him, and practically pressed himself against Itachi, who calmly stepped out and to the Hyuga's side.

"Shikamaru, please explain to the rest of us as well." He said gently, eyes not leaving Sasuke.

"I... don't really know. I think..." He looked to Sasuke, who turned to look back impatiently. "Er.. uh. Well, let him go look in a mirror first, then I'll explain."

Itachi didn't seem satisfied with this, but nodded none-the-less.

Deidara snorted. "Well, damn, as much as I hate to miss this little *family fiasco*... I think I'll go wait at the table for you all to sort this shit out, yeah." he said, whirling around with a flip of his blonde hair to saunter away, shoulders shaking in unmistakeable laughter.

"The first intelligent thing you've said all week, brat." Sasori finally spoke up, taking a miniscule step forward out from his spot behind the group. "I will go as well, you seem to need time to figure this out. As Deidara said, please come inform us of what you determine from the situation." With that he turned and silently followed after the blonde.

Kakuzu only stared in what seemed to be seething silence before turning around and doing the same.

Neji, still stricken into silence, stayed exactly where he was, managing to shift his eyes to Shikamaru's and silently convey that he would join them in a bit.

So Shikamaru nodded to Itachi, who gave Sasuke one last confused look, sighed, and continued walking past them to Shikamaru's original destination before all this shit had occurred. "This way." He said in monotone.

Shikamaru made the 'You first' gesture when Not-Sasuke looked to him for guidance, and then nearly bounced into step behind Itachi.

"So are we in some kind of shitty mansion? What's with this place? Kakuzu must've picked it out huh? I think he fucking outdid himself on this one. Never seen a bigger pile of crap in my life."

Shikamaru reveled at the bipolar mood swings of... whoever this was. Hidan may have been confusing, able to go from one extreme to the other, but never in such dizzying amounts. How could he act so... so *Hidan* right now? How could this situation not be bothering the shit out of him? Even if it was somehow the zealot in Sasuke's body, that didn't explain why he'd be acting so moronic.

*Not even - make sense - REAL! - you still think I'm stupid.*

He blinked, stopping for only a second as he followed the two down the hall. That was a chunk of what Hidan had been saying to him in his head earlier... Not even make sense... real. That described the situation perfectly.

*This does not even make sense, but it's real.*

Once more he blinked. That's it. You had to fill in the blanks.. it was a coded message! RIGHT!

An involuntary smile peeked across his face.

But damn, he couldn't remember everything that had been said...

"Is Red-eyes the butler? That's be fuckin' great." Sasuke/Hidan said, bringing Shikamaru's attention back to the present. "I think I like this hallucination, now that all that annoying shit is over. They slipped me some serious fucking drugs this time, I've never had one as crazy fuckin' real as this. My face still hurts!"

"Who slipped you drugs?" Shikamaru questioned as they stopped before the bathroom door. Itachi turned to the two but remained silent, seemingly just as interested in the answer.

Sasuke's face went dark. "The dead motherfuckers that caught me."

"Who? Do you know who they were?" The Nara pressed on.

"Nah, they claimed to be Jashinists but their bunch of half-wit, pussy asses would never survive Jashin's judgement. He'd slaughter'em on the spot."

"How did they get you?" Itachi said in his soft voice, seeming to finally catch on.

"Through a bunch of slippery bullshit tricks!" the Not-Sasuke said in an agitated tone. "I fucking killed a shit-load of em and mutilated a hell of a lot more, but they just kept fucking coming at me. Put these weird handcuffs on me that kept me from using any fuckin' jutsu, dislocated my arms and legs and tied me up. Pansies. They better keep me good and drugged, Cause I'm killing off the rest of the fuckers if I ever wake up..." He paused, studying Shikamaru again. "Damn, you look so different..."

"They've kept you unconcious?" Itachi asked before Shika had the chance.

"Yeah. I wake up every now and then. I coulda sworn that's what was happening earlier it felt like I was awake, still does, but I was in this place... Must be another goddamn dream. I think they've been trying to trick me into doing some shit, they think I'm a fucking idiot..."

*You still think I'm stupid..*

"They haven't been... torturing you... or anything?"

He shrugged. "Ahh I don't fucking know... Whatever, they can't do shit to me, it's only a matter of time before they fuck up and I get out. Kakuzu got out, I can too. Are we gonna find a mirror or what?"

"Hi-... Hidan.." Shikamaru said, it felt strange to say it to Sasuke's face, but then mans attention landed on him, one brow arched high as he waited. A signature Hidan expression.

Oh Jashin, he needed to stop saying his life couldn't get any more fucked up.

"... Nevermind. The mirrors in there.." He surrendered, gesturing weakly to the door.

The Sasuke/Hidan regarded the door for a second before pushing through without a second word. Itachi and Shikamaru stayed where they were, staring at each other in calculating silence.

"Hidan is in Sasuke's body." Itachi said, finally stating aloud Shikamaru's suspicions.

The Nara gave a small nod. "That's as much as I've been able to figure out.. I thought Sasuke was just being a jerk at first but... There's no way he could mimic Hidan so perfectly. There's no logical reason why he'd go to all that trouble!"

"Neji had his byakugan up, didn't he?"

Again Shika responded with a nod.

"Please go fetch him. I have a theory but I need his verification."

"I'm right here.." Neji's voice said from where they'd come from. The Hyuga came trudging slowly up to them, looking extremely pale.

"Are you all right, Neji?" Itachi said, his expression not mirroring his attempt to seem concerned.

"Well, how would you feel if your arch enemy inexplicably possesses your boyfriends body?" He muttered, only confirming the other men's suspicions.

"So you agree with our assumptions?"

"I don't just agree, I can confirm it. That's not Sasuke. I mean, it's Sasuke's chakra, Sasuke's body, Sasuke's sharingan, his voice, everything physical is Sasuke..." He said, pausing to lift his eyes



from the floor where they'd been rooted to stare at the older Uchiha. "But.. it's hard to explain. It's his curse mark, It's... it's like it's alive. It has it's own chakra source somewhere, It's all mixed in with Sasuke's, wrapped around it almost..."

"What color is it?" Shikamaru said quickly.

Neji looked at him for a moment, exhausted and still somewhat confused. "What color do you *think* it is?"

"It's red isn't it? Blood red."

Neji nodded sadly. "Hidan's chakra..."

Itachi put a hand to his chin in thought, propping it up with the other arm pulled across his lower chest. "That's what I thought. It's the curse mark, Hidan is somehow using it to project his concious into Sasuke's body."

"But I thought only Orochimaru could do that!" Neji replied.

"Only Orochimaru can, you're correct..." Itachi trailed off in thought.

"So how the *fuck* is Hidan here instead of him!?" Neji said, voice pitched high.

Shikamaru agreed whole-heartedly with his reaction, except for the fact that he was excited about it instead of horrified.

"This is the only scenario I can think of.." Itachi said, lowering his hands. "Sasuke agree'd to let Orochimaru take him over next time an attack occured. He must have had one in the middle of the night, and he'd let it happen willingly. I can only assume that Orochimaru must have shown up, saw what we were planning in Sasuke's mind, and replaced his presence with Hidan to toy with us."

"Why did no one forsee that happening!?" Neji whisper-yelled, after there was a loud bang in the bathroom.

"The Idea was for Sasuke to *tell me* when an attack was coming, so I could immediatly place a genjutsu on Orochimaru. Not just let it happen without warning. I suppose I should have gone to greater lengths to make that clear..." Itachi sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Oh this is fucking perfect. So now what? We *still* don't have any way to figure out where the bastard is and now we're stuck with a useless psychopath in the body of the person who was supposed to show us the way!" Neji said, throwing his arms up in defeat.

"Well... why can't you just use a genjutsu on Hidan?" Shikamaru said, earning another sigh from the Uchiha and an apologetic, weary stare from the brunette.

Silence floated between the three ment for 3 heartbeats before the Nara's brows dropped in irritation. "What? Why can't we do that?"

"Sharingan doesn't work on Hidan, Shikamaru." Neji said, glancing curiously at Itachi. "Isn't that right?"

Itachi only nodded, not meeting either of their eyes.

"Wait.. what? Since when?" The Jashinist said, looking angrily back and forth between the two. He felt a little left out, and as a result, a little bit betrayed. This was rather important information, Itachi should have mentioned it a looong time ago. And why the hell did Neji know, but not himself? Unless maybe Sasuke told him...

"It never has. Not since I first met Hidan." Itachi stated even quieter than usual. "It doesn't work on you either... not anymore."

Now both the Hyuga and his ex looked quizically at Itachi.

"It doesn't work on Shikamaru?"

"What do you mean?"

"Not since you converted to Jashinism."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Itachi regarded them both calmly before the door to the bathroom burst open, revealing an extremely red-faced, pissed off looking Sasuke.

All three men turned to look at him, he stared back, breathing heavily, obviously trying to control the rage seeping from him in waves.

"Someone... better start *fucking* explaining... right *fucking* now."

Shikamaru looked back to Itachi, face also darkened in anger.

More secrets. Of course there was more secrets. Would there ever be a time when people didn't keep shit from him? Would he ever be caught up on his own goddamn religion?

"Let's rejoin the others, and then I will do my best to shed light on the situation..." Itachi said somewhat sullenly, moving past the others to return down the hall.

Neji looked back and forth between the two remaining men, shifting nervously. "I guess I'll... uh... just.. follow him." He said, whirling to scurry after the older Uchiha.

"Pineapple Head..." Hidan said in Sasuke's voice.

Shikamaru twitched uncomfortably at it, but met his eyes.

"You're real, aren't you? This is real. It's really happening."

The fellow Jashinist nodded solemnly. "Yes... Hidan. I don't know how... but this is real."

He was taken offguard as arms suddenly closed so tightly around him that the air whoosed out of his lungs. He realized after a few seconds that Sasuke's lips had just pressed themselves against his

own for a brief second, and then in the blink of an eye the man was standing back where he had been.

"You tell anyone that just happened and I'll fucking kill you." The Not-Sasuke said, before walking off the direction Neji and Itachi had gone.

Shikamaru stood in the same place stiffly, unable to move due to the millions of thoughts racing through his head, and yet none at all.

Oh Jashin... Hidan had kissed him... Which was good. But with Sasuke's body... That was bad. That was awful, actually. Psycholocially scarring.

Even worse yet was the butterflies that were still zipping around his stomach and the light pattering of his heart rate in his ears.

Hidan had missed him, quite a bit apparently. He was so happy to see him that he was unable to keep himself from committing that terrible act that would surely haunt Shikamaru's nights for quite some time.

Ugh, this was the worst possible time for such distracting sensations and feelings. It pissed him off, but at the same time made him want to laugh.

Hidan was back. Maybe not in his body, but only the crazy albino would do something so stupid and thoughtless... and sweet and heart-wrenching.

*Damn you Hidan...*

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Not long after, everyone was once again gathered around the dining/conference card table, waiting impatiently for someone to explain what the hell was going on.

Hidan(Sasuke) Sat leaning back in the folding chair with his arms crossed, glaring unhappily into the distance. Itachi was behind him. Everyone else was on the other side of the table, except for Neji and Shikamaru who were placed opposite each other on the right or left side of the table from Sasuke(Hidan).

"Sooo..." Deidara said, breaking the intense silence and leaning forward across the surface to get a better look at the younger Uchiha(elder Jashinist). "Is that really the psycho in there, hm?"

"Hey!" Hidan/Sasuke snapped, "Don't act like I'm not in the goddamn room you brainless barbie-doll! I can still sacrifice the shit out of you and your empty goddamn head!"

The blonde whistled in mock appreciation. "Holy shit... it *is* him! I don't know whether to be glad that stuck up Uchiha is gone or pissed off that I have to deal with your stupid ass, yeah."

"Can you? Don't forget you're in Pretty boy's body now. " He said, breaking into a huge smile. "Which means I could blow you both to fuckery if I wanted to, hm!"

"You'll do no such thing." Sasori intervened, smacking him once again on the back of the head.

Deidara hissed in a breath and mumbled some incomprehensible complaint, but stayed quiet.

Sasori continued on. "I'm sure we're all curious as to how this happened."

"Yeah, so start fucking talking Red-eyes." Hidan(Sasuke) said, almost looking as if he were going to pounce on the blonde.

Kakuzu had yet to say or do anything other than silently study the Sasuke-Hidan mixture, and other than that initial awkward moment, the two had yet to even acknowledge each other. this bugged Shikamaru, but made him resist a smile at the same time. Despite

the confusion earlier, he'd been a bit put-off that Hidan had run to and held Kakuzu the way he did. Even if he had Sasuke's body, Hidan was still his by the way of fate.

"Yes, well. As you all know the plan we had originally laid out was to have Sasuke let Orochimaru possess his body so that I could cast a genjutsu on him and trick him into leading us to his hideout. Sasuke had finally agree'd to this at the end of our conversation, and so it happens he seems to have had an attack this very night." He looked around the room, seeming to gauge everyone's reactions, but no one made one, and so he continued. "The only circumstance I can come up with is as I've already said to Shikamaru and Neji here, who helped me to devise it. Orochimaru came in the night, saw in Sasuke's mind what we were planning, and to throw us off, somehow replaced his presence with Hidan's."

At this point Deidara opened his mouth to ask a question, but Itachi quickly held up a hand, closing his eyes as he regaled the rest of the explanation. "It was already suggested that I simply continue with the plan and cast the genjutsu on Hidan..." he trailed off, leaving a room full of expectant stares.

Shikamaru noticed itachi's discomfort earlier at admitting that Sharingan didn't work. And though he was still upset with Itachi for continueing to keep secrets from him, he could sense now how badley the Uchiha wanted to withhold the information from everyone else. If he understood right, being unaffected by Sharingan was not just some trait restricted to Hidan. Itachi had made a point of saying that it applied to Shikamaru as well because he was a Jashinist. and anything related to Jashinism should be kept quiet from allies who might misunderstand.

"But Orochimaru saw what we were planning and somehow made genjutsu unaffective on him." He finished for the man, whose eyes flicked to him, appreciation flashing across them.

"Yes. We've tried already, and it did not work." He said calmly.

Neji looked back and forth between the two suspiciously, and Shikamaru eyed him, trying to mentally portray the situation for the Hyuga. Whether he understood or not was unknown, but the brunette remained quiet.

"I find it revolting that no one thought this situation might occur." Kakuzu finally said. "Sasuke should have been being *monitered*."

"Yes, Kakuzu, I agree." Itachi said tiredly. "It was an error on my part to not clarify to him that he was to fetch me when the take-over took place. I suppose I was wrong in assuming he would know this."

"So just have his little boyfriend chase the psycho out of his body, yeah." Deidara said almost boredly, gesturing to Neji. "You said he did it before."

"What I did before was chase out the chakra that took him over when his transformation occurred. That knocked him unconscious, which kept Orochimaru from being able to corrupt him. The curse seal is a mixture of Science and Jutsu, it's not as simple as just cutting off the chakra junctions." The Byakugan user explained somewhat impatiently, as if Deidara were to inexplicably already know this. "The chakra from the curse seal enabling Hidan to possess his body is coming from somewhere else and leaking through the seal, flooding his system. It's not traveling by the normal chakra paths, there's no way for me to cut it off."

"So why don't we just knock him around until he passes out, hm?"

"Because I'll fucking rip your hair out and hang you with it, that's why!" Hidan spat at the blonde.

"How are we to know that this is really Hidan and not some ploy?" Kakuzu said, distracting the two from the inevitable arguing match.

"Because it's *his* chakra leaking through. I'd know it anywhere." Neji said lowly, eyes downcast.

Sasori cleared his throat then. "Well, at the very least, this confirms our suspicions that it is indeed Orochimaru who has taken Hidan captive."

Everyone seemed to silently acknowledge this.

"But it seems now that we have been left without any way to complete the mission. With Hidan in Sasuke's body, we no longer have your brother's in-depth knowledge of Orochimaru at hand." He said, looking at the eldest Uchiha. "It seems he's successfully slashed any chances we had."

"Sasuke *did* warn us that he was not to be underestimated." Itachi stated quietly.

"Is there any chance maybe it would wear off if Sas-... ermmm *Hidan*... just went to sleep?" Neji piped.

"I do not know." Itachi replied.

Then everyone was brought violently to attention as Hidan slammed his fist on the table. "ALRIGHT FUCKERS! First of all, I'm right fucking here, quit talking like I'm not. Second; Are you fucktards just completley ignoring the fact that *I'm* here now?"

the entire room looked at him in question, which he responded to with a huge sigh.

"Okay, I guess I need to use smaller fucking words." He said, standing up. "From what I've fucking heard so far I'm gonna go ahead and guess that you guys are all gathered here in this shithole to fucking rescue me or something. That's fucking flattering and all, but this fucking idiot that has be captive here is a dumb-shit, and I can get out on my own."

"If that were true, Hidan. You would not be in this situation." Kakuzu said.



"Shove it up your ass old man. I wasn't done, don't fucking interrupt me." Hidan barked, beginning to pace. "Anyway, since I'm stuck in this body, I can't really get myself out. But I can still help, once I get used to this scrawny ass body."

He stopped next to Itachi. "Tell your brother to start working out Red-eyes, seriously." He said, then whirling around to move next to the fellow Jashinist watching this all happen in amusement. "And you, Pineapple fucker, need to give me my goddamn scythe back. I don't fucking know how to do all Red-eyes' brother's techniques and shit, so I at least need a weapon I'm familiar with."

"I must say Hidan, I'm surprised that you're taking this so well." Sasori said, not looking as if he were surprised at all. "Transitioning bodies can't possibly be so easy."

"Yeah well, I'm just fucking happy to be off that stupid fucking table..." Hidan(Sasuke) replied.

"What I'm kind of pissed about here is that this kid over here had all of us all worked up that you were in some kind of horrible torturous pain, hm." Deidara said, gesturing to Shikamaru. "He's been aggravating the shit out of everyone. ' *We have to save Hidaaaaaan. We have to save Hidaaaaaan!*' Hm. And now we find out you were actually having a goddamn blast. That's a fucking burn, yeah."

In half a second Sasuke(Hidan) had vaulted across the table, snatched Deidara by the collar of his shirt, pushed him 10 feet across the room and slammed him against the wall. He leaned in close to glare at the blonde with deadly intent while everyone else shoved themselves from their chairs, ready to jump in if necessary but not intervening yet.

Only Kakuzu and Shikamaru hadn't moved an inch. His smirk had grown into a full on smile now. Kakuzu only twisted in his seat to watch.

"What the hell do you know about horrible, torturous pain, *blondie*? " Hidan growled in Sasuke's voice, so low and threatening that Deidara swallowed heavily, and Itachi stepped forward, hands glowing faintly.

"Do you know how many times I woke up unable to do anything other than scream because my organs were hung on fucking *meat hooks* above my body? Still attached and working just fine, but no longer inside me where they belong. How long I laid there, each second dragging by, taking fucking centuries while I prayed and prayed for something, *anything* just to knock me unconscious. Have you ever been in such all-consuming pain that you stop feeling anything at all? Unable to convert it to pleasure because the drugs your captors are pumping into your system keeps your mind from working properly? Because they're being *extra fucking careful* not to get even one tiny, miniscule, little drop of blood reach your mouth so you can have just one fucking second of peace? Have you ever had that happen to you, Deidara?" He asked, pulling the blonde off the wall a small bit and slamming him back again when he didn't answer.

"I have been through some serious fucking *hell* before. I've felt some pretty intense fucking pain. I have been tied to a fucking stake, and burned alive. And I'd rather do that fifty-fucking-times over than to ever, *ever* go back to being strapped to that goddamn table. You you better listen to you little walking sex-toy and *shut the fuck up* before someone finally gets tired of hearing your annoying fucking voice and puts an end to your worthless heathen life."

He released his hold on the terrified man, who slid limply to the floor. Hidan(Sasuke) stood over him, staring but not focusing on him as he appeared to be regaining control of himself.

Shikamaru's smile had dissapeared, and his face and stomach sank at the mentions of Hidan's methods of being tortured. He had seen these things happening as if he were there, felt the pain, the hopelessness, and the questioning of his faith that the zealot had not mentioned. He had seen bits and pieces of all of this every time he

managed to fall asleep, and he was sick with the notion that it had actually happened, that his poor Hidan had been forced through that.

At least previous to this night, he could mostly convince himself that they were nothing more than nightmares. He could take imaginary solace in the belief that maybe it actually wasn't true. But having it confirmed... he almost felt he was going to be sick.

Sasuke(Hidan) whirled around then, back to the normal, goofy, mood he'd been in previously, and clapped his hands together.

"Alright, so I don't know about any of you fuckers, but I could definitely go for letting off a little bit of built-up tension. So who the fuck wants to fight?"

"You shouldn't be fighting anyone until you get used to that body, Hidan." Kakuzu said.

"That's right. Sasuke is not immortal. You cannot be as reckless as you usually are." Itachi added. "I will personally see to it that you are dead if you harm my brother."

"That's why I want to fight you fucking idiots! I have to figure out a whole new battle style and you motherfuckers are going to help me since you been just sitting around this shithole scratching your asses this whole time!" Hidan shouted, then pointed dramatically at Shikamaru. "You're first! Let's go!"

"He's right." Sasori said now, helping a shaken Deidara back to his feet. "We no longer need to conserve our chakra since our earlier plan failed anyway. If he's going to help us then he'll need to know his own strengths and weaknesses."

"But isn't there still the chance that Orochimaru could pull out Hidan and take his place at any moment?" Neji piped up nervously, still standing beside his seat at the table.

The group was silent for a moment as everyone considered this.

"Yes, that's a good observation. However, we are powerless to do anything about it. All we can do is make sure Hidan is monitored constantly." Itachi said softly.

Hidan(Sasuke) made a face at this, but recovered quickly.

"Whatever, I don't even care. I just wanna blow off some steam." He started walking in the opposite direction of the door that led outside. "C'mon Pineapple head. Let's go."

"Hidan.." Shikamaru said boredly. He didn't get an answer, and he could help the small smile that slipped onto his features.

"Hidan!"

"WHAT!?"

"The door's that way."

**A/N-**

**Yeah.**

**Bet you guys weren't expecting THAT huh?**

**Hehehe.**

**Tell me what you think in a review. Forgive the typos. And don't forget that I luuurve each and every one of you.**

**Seeya next chapter! :)**

**~Wierdo.**

# Desperation

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## Come What May

The sound of metal clashing, pained and effort-laced grunts, and growled, frustrated curses broke the thick silence pervading the early morning air.

Neji and Itachi stood at moderate distance away, watching the two jashinists, reunited through this bizarre series of events, have at each other, each with their own visual jutsu activated. With the rest of the Akatsuki returned to bed, the Hyuga finally had the time to just sit and think. Though honestly he was doing more inner-freaking out than anything else.

Sasuke was Hidan. Hidan was Sasuke. The outer shell of his boyfriend, with the mind of the only person in the world he could honestly claim he hated.

This was the second time that psycho had taken something precious to him and tainted it. And this time he hadn't even left an opening.

No matter how much physical strength he procured, no matter how many of his demons he managed to slay, That albino fucking idiot continued to show up and ruin *everything*.

He glared the glare of death at the flailing man, trying desperately to land some sort of hit on Shikamaru with the scythe his ex had magically conjured out of thin air, letting his arms squeeze tighter around his body, crossed as they were.

Shikamaru even had that damn scythe now. The way he moved so easily and fluently, hardly even taking his hands out of his pockets as he back or side-stepped Hidan(Sasuke)'s infuriated swings of his weapons, the way he looked at him with that calculated stare, cold

but warm at the same time... He felt like he were in some alternate dimension, behind a two-way mirror like some experiment. Surely there were two aliens sitting there, laughing after they'd abducted him and put these images in his head. Surely, by the grace of any universal force out there, it wasn't real.

He could deal with Shikamaru transforming into an exact replica of his enemy, because he knew that beneath the skin, he was still Shikamaru. He could deal with Sasuke being some sort of crazy genetic science experiment because he knew, again, that underneath it all, it was Sasuke in there. He could deal, he thought, with Itachi killing his whole family because he believed wholeheartedly that it was saving the lives of millions of other people, because he believed in his heart and soul that the elder Uchiha was a good man, and he knew that he was tortured by this decision every waking second.

But this... this was too much...

It was bad enough that Hidan was still alive. It was bad enough that he'd stolen Shikamaru from his grasp, even if it had partially been Neji's fault. It was bad enough, that the psycho had turned his back on the poor nara after everything he'd put him through, that Shikamaru still strived after the man in a way he'd never done for Neji despite the complete heartbreak he must have went through. That he'd turned the poor, easygoing, simple Shikamaru Nara into a Sadomasochistic serial killer.

But now he was stealing Sasuke's body? Sasuke, who'd already been through hell and back, Sasuke, who'd Hidan had fucking used to take the fall for him back when they'd first met. Sasuke, who was finally showing progress, finally doing better, who was finally granted the promise of putting Orochimaru, that motherfucker who caused all the strife in his life, into the ground once and for all... Hidan was going to take that away!?

His body was tensed so hard now with the desire to just snap his neck right there and then that he was shuddering slightly.

He should not have come on this mission, as glad as he was that he did. Perhaps if he hadn't come, Sasuke would not have come, and this whole mess could have been avoided. Maybe he would have even turned the tides, maybe, without the younger Uchiha, the Akatsuki and Shikamaru would have had no way of rescuing Hidan, maybe the stubborn fucking immortal would have finally been put down for good. Maybe the world would have been safe...

But, that was nothing more than wishful thinking, he reasoned inside his mind, ablaze with the fires of wrath that he was trying desperately to control.

The world was always in danger, for one reason or another. Had he and Sasuke not come, surely something even more bizarre and macabre would have occurred. At least this way, the situation is relatively monitored. At least this way, Hidan was relatively helpless.

For the moment, that is.

"I confess..." Itachi's gentle voice murmured to his right, tearing his aching eyes from the battlefield momentarily to focus on him. "I have encountered a great many grotesque and disturbing things throughout my short time on this Earth. But this one is by far the most distressing."

The Byakugan user only sighed in response, returning to surveying the sparring match between his ex and the body of his current lover. He had to admit, he was somewhat intrigued by Shikamaru's chakra. It was not the same as it had been last time he'd really watched him. Of course, he was immortal now, wasn't he?

It occurred to him only now that he really knew nothing of the man anymore. This hurt him deeply, for some reason, as much as he knew that it shouldn't.

"How is this even possible...?" He murmured to the man standing in much the same stance beside him, as an escape from his raging thoughts if nothing else.

"You've no idea how desperately I wish I could answer that question, Neji Hyuga... But I'm just as baffled as you are. To be able to remove a mind, or perhaps, a soul from a body, with the body remaining alive. That alone is an impossible feat. But to replace it with another? I've never understood Orochimaru's capabilities to do things such as this. Because half of it is not jutsu, my sharingan doesn't possess the ability to break it down and understand it..."

Neji listened half-heartedly, watching as Shikamaru easily evaded one of Hidan(Sasuke's) attacks and slipped behind him to restrain the shouting man with an arm around his throat. He noted the small smile the spikey-haired Jashinist wore, and his heart only sank further when he saw the man's dark eyes, looking down at Sasuke's body fondly, content, as if everything were right again in his world.

It angered him too, noting the fact that Shikamaru could be so comforted by something that was so powerfully disturbing to Neji.

What had happened to them? They were a team once. Always on the same page, able to read each other like an open book...

"I suppose, we can at least be thankful that it happened the way it did. "

Neji's attention snapped back to him, a scowl finally cementing itself onto his features. "How the hell is that something for us to be thankful for?"

Itachi didn't even turn to regard him, only smiling slightly for a few heartbeats in response. "Well, at the very least, Hidan is an idiot. Had we had to deal with Orochimaru, we all may very well be dead by now... This way, we have the same number of allies aiding us in our endeavors, instead of one more enemy among us."

Neji considered this a bit before again returning his attention to the battle. He watched the two fight, nulling over this statement in his head. He supposed, under the circumstances, Hidan really was on the same team. But the thing that bothered him most was exactly



what itachi had said. *Hidan is an idiot*. How could the raven-haired man beside him be so assured that that dipshit wasn't going to get Sasuke's mortal body fatally injured. He didn't know how to be a mortal! Just look at the way he acted! Even in this sparring match, he had no regard for his own safety, charging Shikamru the way he did, taking such huge swings with that damned scythe, leaving himself wide open so often...

This led him to a train of thought that concerned him, and made a smile tug at the edge of his mouth at the same time.

If Hidan's soul was in this mortal body... did that make *him* mortal too?

He was ripped away from this train of thought as a sudden wild howling snapped him back to reality. He was greeted with the image of Sasuke be thrown through the air by the Nara as if he weighed no more than a twig.

More out of reflex, and concern for Sasuke's body's health, he jumped into action, making a few handsigns before closing his eyes and pushing his moulded chakra from his body. A shimmering, nearly translucent blob reached up over his head, growing fingers and morphing itself into a hand as it did. The howling Sasuke collided with it, knocking it backward just a bit as the finger closed safely around him.

The hand lowered the body safely to the ground before Neji dissolved the technique, and Sasuke spun around and looked the Hyuga up and down with an expression that was not Sasuke's at all.

"Well fuck *me* . The princess has got some new moves too eh? Damn, I need to stop going on these little fuckin' vacations." He said, reaching up to scratch the back of his neck almost sheepishly.

"Shikamaru!" Itachi snapped as the other jashinist stalked lazily over to the group. "You need to be more careful! Hidan doesn't have proper control over his body yet, you can't go tossing him around

with such blatant disregard. There's no promise of him landing on his feet. He could very well break his neck."

"Awee, Red-eyes! I'm touched! I didn't know you care." Hidan purred as Shikamaru opened his mouth to respond.

Itachi only rolled his eyes in irritation. "I'm concerned only for my brother, Hidan."

"Tch, go fuck yourself then. Dick." Sasuke (Hidan) said, attempting to pop his back as he twisted his upper body roughly. "You heard him Pineapple head. Be nice to me, I can't fucking do shit with this goddamn useless fucking body."

Again Itachi rolled his eyes. "Why don't you use my brother's sharingan to your advantage then?"

"Maybe because I don't know how the fuck to turn it on!"

"But you had it activated inside the safehouse..." Shikamaru finally piped, earning a skeptical glance from Sasuke (Hidan).

"Oh yeah? Maybe that was why I could see in the dark, and why my eyes neraly popped outta my fucking head when you douchebags turn the fuckin' lights on all the sudden..." He spoke while putting a hand to his chin in a poor attempt to look studious. "But still, I don't fuckin' know how I did it... I didn't even know what the fuck was going on then! I thought I was dreaming still!"

"Well then, dipshit, just ask Itachi to show you." Neji almost growled. As much as he hated giving the oblivious moron any kind of assistance, it was in Sasuke's best interest that he learned the in's and out's of his body and chakra as fast as possible.

"Heeey, Yeahh. Good thinking Princess! Lookit you being all nice to me! It's not so hard after all is it?" He said, reaching out to ruffle Neji's hair before his hand was slapped roughly away.

"Don't fucking touch me, freak."

Sasuke's face twisted only for a second into a grimace before relaxing again as he let out a chuckle. "Ahhh, alright alright, I get it. I'm sorry for being an asshole to you earlier. I was just confused, I thought you were just being a dumb bitch like usual."

"YOU FUCKING-"

"Ehh, Hidan? You should probably shut up now." Shikamaru interrupted, grabbing a raging Neji by his shoulders and turning him around to lead him away. Neji, for a reason he couldn't understand, was slightly shocked by the sudden contact between his ex and himself. He tipped his head forward, letting his long hair hide his tinted cheeks from view as the Jashinist led them away from the zealot, and also holding back the terrible, gnawing, anger this whole situation was causing.

"Hidan, you need to control your emotions, or run the risk of activating the curse seal and transforming." Itachi said simply.

"Good!" Sasuke's voice said loudly. "Maybe then I can stop getting my ass kicked by the Pineapple Head! This is just fucking pitiful, seriously."

"You fucking idiot!" Neji snarled, whirling around. "You'll lose control of your body if you do that. You'll give Orochimaru power over Sasuke and turn him into a fucking weapon and put all our lives and this stupid rescue mission in jeopardy if you let yourself transform!"

"I was fucking kidding with you you stupid priss! For fuck's sake get the stick out of your ass! It's not like I specifically fucking *requested* to get stuck in this shit-eaters body!"

"THE ONLY SHIT-EATER HERE IS YOU!"

"Neji! Calm down! Hidan, shut up!" Shikamaru barked, forcing the Hyuga to turn around again. "Damn. It's sad when the crazy guy has

to be the voice of reason..." He muttered, once again leading the brunette away from the other two men.

"Tch, Fuckin' Princess, can't take a joke..." He heard Sasuke's voice mutter in the background. His anger suddenly washed away as a pang of agony shot through his chest. That had really sounded like Sasuke there... It was something heartless he'd probably say.

"Itachi, show Hidan the ropes. I need to talk to Neji anyway."  
Shikamaru said loudly as Neji struggled to control his emotions.

When they were a decent enough distance away, only able to hear the near inaudible murmuring's of each men's voice, Shikamaru stopped, turning Neji around and hunching over slightly to look him in the eyes. He'd apparently gotten slightly taller since they'd last seen each other, before they'd been almost the same height.

"You really gotta stop doing that, you know. That's still Hidan in there, he's still unpredictable."

Neji took a small step back to distance himself between the uncomfortable close-range his ex had fixed himself at. "Please. I'm not scared of him. He's still just as fucking brainless as he's always been."

"Neji.."

"And besides. He can't do anything to me when he can't control his own body. And even if he could, I know all of Sasuke's techniques. He's harmless to me the way he is now."

"Neji.."

"And I'm not going to just let him act that way. Everyone just ignores him, like he's some little kid that doesn't know any better. I don't care if I have to stoop to his level just to get the message across, he's not going to sit there and keep insulting Sasuke when he's the one fucking hijacking his body!"

"Neji."

"WHAT!?"

Shikamaru looked almost as if he were holding back laughter. And once more, for reason's slightly beyond the Hyuga, his insides warmed a little bit. His poor ex had looked absolutely terrible when they'd been sitting there in the hideout. Back all those years ago, he could still remember how absolutely exhausted the man had looked, just from a lack of sleep. And he'd thought that was bad... God, if he'd known he'd be looking at the man now...

It was strange really, he still had all the same aspects of the Shikamaru that had once been his. Those narrow eyes that could fool you so easily into believing he was some lazy oaf who didn't care about anything. He still kept that same hairstyle, Though now he had quite a few loose bangs that fell down freely over his face. He still had that narrow jawline, the lean-lanky kind of appearance, but now he had distinct chords of muscle running thickly beneath significantly tanner skin.

And that was just what he noticed upon first glance. When you studied the man, the way he moved now, the way he spoke, how his eyes remained perfectly still but nearly slashed like a projector as thoughts raced across his mind... It was all like some indescribable mixture of the man he once knew and someone completely new.

"You really, *really* need to stop cursing. Seriously. It makes you sound so unintelligent. Doesn't look good on you." He said, a warm smile pulling at the edge of his lips. "Leave the mindless swearing to us idiot Jashinist, eh?"

Neji stared into his eyes in surprise and confusion for a minute, knowing full well that that slight burning in his cheeks was likely a blush.

The eyes were what had changed the most. They were so different, and yet... not really at all. Aside from the terrible bags hanging

loosley beneath them, and the stress and worry lines that had worked their way onto his once smooth face... there was something else. Far in the back, a sort of dull, void look. As if something had died inside of him.

It relit the Hyuga's anger, but it was kept heavily in check by the longing sense of sadness that trotted in alongside it.

Poor Shikamaru, how many times was his poor heart going to break?

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Neji was pretty. Just as pretty as he'd always been, if not even moreso.

It made Shikamaru happy, though at this point there wasn't really much of anything that could ruin his mood. Watching all of hidan's expressions flash across Sasuke's face, getting to knock the bastard younger brother around while hearing typical 'Hidan' responses. There really was nothing that could have boosted his mood any more than this.

the fact alone that Hidan was back was the biggest part. He really couldn't care less that it wasn't in his body, he couldn't care less that he really couldn't touch him just for the sheer wrong-ness that action would cause.

All he knew was that things were making sense again. The voices had subsided for now, he wasn't hearing Hidan's whispered plea's anymore. Life was good again, however temporarily.

"Yeah, well. Sasuke doesn't mind me cussing." Neji said back, with the distince hint of a blush on his cheeks. This only made the Nara smile more. He really felt nothing for Neji as far as romance went. He still sort of loved him, but it had dulled down from passionate love to more of just that general fondness of a protector.

But, it was sort of a boost to his ego for the Hyuga to act the way he was.

"Well. Sasuke's a tool."

The Hyuga's pretty face darkened into a scowl that nearly made the Jashinist burst out into laughter with how wierdly terrifying it was.

"Oh, don't you start in on him too. I told you, he'd had a tough life, cut him some slack."

"Well c'mon now Neji. You can talk shit on my guy but I can't be a little offput by yours? At least Hidan's just an idiot. Sasuke purposely tries to be a dick."

"He does not!"

"Does so."

"No he doesn't! You don't know anything about him!"

"And you know nothing of Hidan and I."

Shikamaru watched in vauge interest as Neji's jaw worked, grinding his teeth, no doubt. "Fine. I get what you're trying to do. But i already said, I'm not gonna let him keep getting away with acting like a child."

"You'll be wasting your energy. But You're welcome to try."

Shikamaru responsed, shrugging a single shoulder before he turned around to regard the two men. Itachi had his hands out and his eyes shut, lips moving slightly as he attempted an explanation of how to activate the sharingan to Hidan(Sasuke). His younger brother(Elder friend) was in the same pose, though his face was contorted, unsurprisingly, in impatient frustration.

"What I really wanted to ask you about was his chakra." He said, changing the subject. "I can kind of see how this whole situation came about, but You said Hidan's chakra is wrapped around

Sasuke's, so what I don't understand is if he has his own chakra, why can't he use his own techniques instead of having to learn Sasuke's?"

Neji considered this for a second, letting his Byakugan fall before sighing and rubbing his eyes. "The only way I can think to explain it to someone who can't see it the way I do... Well, it seems to me like there's only enough leaking through the mark to keep him firmly anchored into the body. And like it said, its sort of intertwined with Sasuke's. There's way more gold than red, and the only reason it's able to hold it's power is because there's no resistance, it's almost like being in a suit of armor, you know. You only need enough strength to be able to move it around."

He paused, eyes still closed, to take a deep breath. When he reaopened them, the Byakugan was active once again. "So, that's all he's really getting, enough power to control the body, no excess. So he's not left with anything to mould."

"That makes sense..." Shikamaru said, adopting a thoughtful position, tapping his forefinger onto his lips. "I had a different theory. It was pretty far-fetched though... but then again, I've given up the notion that certain things are impossible. I still keep getting surprised despite that, though..."

"What were you thinking?" Neji questioned curiously, a very small smile of excitement on his face.

the Nara couldn't help but return it, after all, they'd not had the chance to work with each other in a very long time. Getting reacquainted, seeing how the workings of each others minds had changed, was kind of intriguing. "Well... you know how Hidan could never even use Jutsu before... you know. Me and him."

"Yes.." The brunette replied, nose curling in disgust.

"Well... Whenever Jashin gives me a boost, my chakra turns red, that same red as Hidan's."



"Neji turned to him quizzically now, the pieces starting to piece together, but still not quite there yet.

Shikamaru continued, "I have a sneaking suspicion that maybe, without Jashin's influence. Hidan might not have been a jutsu user at all. I think maybe he was just a regular guy before this happened... I think that chakra he has isn't actually his, maybe it's just what Jashin pumped into him to help him with the immortality thing."

Neji's eyes flicked around as he thought, Shikamaru only stared calmly at the two men in the distance. It appeared that the Jashinist had finally gotten the Sharingan to activate, at the very least. And Itachi's hand was sparking as the Nara assumed him to be teaching him some of Sasuke's lightning-based attacks.

Sasuke(Hidan) thrust his arm out then, and Shikamaru felt the small twinge of the shift in atmosphere as he tried to channel his stolen chakra. He sighed wearily just as a stray bolt of electricity zapped from Hidan(Sasuke)'s hand and set the grass on fire.

Itachi shouted something and quickly stomped it out, sending the younger Uchiha(elder Jashinist) into a laughing fit.

"So you were thinking that since he wasn't in his original body, he couldn't leech your jutsu off of you."

"Something like that..."

"But Shikamaru, do you think that means that..." He trailed off, brows creasing in thought as he stared at Sasuke.

"What?" He said, curious to see if Neji was reaching the same conclusion he was, asking the same, unanswerable question.

"Well... Do you think he can die now? Since he's not in his immortal body?" He asked. Shikamaru only stared at him with a mixture of concern and confusion to answer his questions. Neji's eyes sparked

in a malicious way for a moment before going back to normal. And this made Shikamaru's gut tighten.

Neji would never harm Sasuke, he didn't think. And to Kill Hidan now would require killing Sasuke. He didn't think there was any risk from the Hyuga... But it still bothered him that Neji thought the possibility that he might not be immortal anymore was so interesting.

"So... It works both ways.." He said, breaking the silence and hopefully to distract whatever train of thought his ex was on. "Hidan get's my abilities. And I get his. And if by some chance he's not immortal anymore... Well... I'm not really sure what kind of position that puts me in..."

The distraction worked, and the brunettes eyes snapped to his, wide in horror.

Shikamaru only stared silently back at him for a moment before turning his eyes back out to his immortal lover inhabiting the body of Neji's boyfriend. What a terrible drag this was...

The only thing he could really think to consol himself that his immortality was not temporarily revoked, was that Jashin normally operated on the level of souls. He consumed souls, they sacrificed souls, the slaughter god made bargains and agreements all with souls as the form of payment. If Hidan was in Sasuke's body, surely his soul was crammed in there too. Surely Jashin's gift was attached strictly to the soul, and not just the body...

But... then.. to counter this. Souls were technically immortal too. They were intangible, bodiless entities. They couldn't be killed... so it would make sense that the body would have to be what was immortalized in order for the soul to continue on in it's container...

*"Kill him..."*

He nearly jumped at the whisper that invaded his head, face losing is serenity in form of turning back to the scowl which had previously

been a permanent fixture.

Well, so much for Hidan's presence chasing away the voices.

His gaze, however, seemed to move against his will when he felt the slight tugging on his awareness, exactly like the small pull he'd felt when that poser Jashinist woman had snuck up on him, and when that Juugo fellow had been stalking him.

It swept across the landscape ruined previously by he and Kakuzu's battle, coming to a rest on the safehouse. They were a fair distance away, but that didn't stop him from seeing the unmistakeable shadow of something standing there just outside the doors.

In a moment of unexplainable panic, his hand came up to clutch Neji's upper arm, grasping painfully tight as his eyes went wide.

*" KILLKILLKILL." The voices screamed in his head. "YOU PINEAPPLE HEADED FUCK! - Got him for you - FUCKING - HURRY THE FUCK UP AND KILL HIM!"*

"Ow, Shikamaru! What are you-What's the matter?" Neji said, turning his head to look in the direction his ex was briefly before looking back at him in confusion. "What's wrong?" He asked again, though much more demanding this time.

"Neji" he croaked, receiving a pair of pale, Byakugan activated eyes looking at him in concern as a response. "Who.. is that over there?"

Again the brunettes hair swished as he turned his head toward the figure, and then back toward the Jashinist, his face completely overcome with confused concern. "That's Kakuzu... why?"

*"Don't think you know- not even- KAKUZU!"*

His eyes remained wide, and breathing came hard, but he managed to release his grip on Neji, pushing back against the voices and the strange sense of fear.

It was just Kakuzu, what was there to freak out about?

*Because he went back to bed.*

Well, so? He got back up.

*He's standing over there lurking like a wierdo. It's suspicious.*

Everything that old bastard does is suspicious.

*"not even- KAKUZU!"*

His eyes narrowed as he tried desperately to regain control of his mind. Not even Kakuzu? What was that supposed to mean? Of course it was Kakuzu, he'd even had that suspicion back when he'd been rescued by the man, but if that were some imposter out to kidnap him, they'd already had plenty of chance.

That was certainly Kakuzu, and as much of a bastard as he was, he was on their side, and there was no reason to kill him.

So shut the fuck up, brain.

"That's wierd..." Neji muttered, making Shikamaru blink back to reality. "His chakra has always been wierd, but... it looks different than before."

Shikamaru let these words sink in, recalling a few weeks ago when Sasori had mentioned the change in Kakuzu's chakra signature as well. Shikamaru still hadn't noticed it, however. It was the same as always.

"Different how?" He pushed on, distracted for a second when a maniacal laugh from Sasuke(Hidan) broke momentarily through the dark morning silence.

"Well.. It's hard to tell really, from so far away. Maybe I'm just seeing things..." He said, Making Shikamaru put a hand on his shoulder again.

"No, Sasori and Deidara both said it was different too. Tell me what you see!"

Neji looked at him somewhat fearfully for a moment, the veins around his eyes from the strain of the byakugan giving his pretty features a somewhat macabre type of appearance. "Shikamaru... are you okay? You're not.. uh... having another of those weird attacks, are you?"

"No, I'm fine, just tell me what's changed about him."

"Are you sure, because you look kind of freaked out all the sudden. Itachi said you were... losing your mind... just like the psycho... is that it?"

"What?" He said, brows dropping in misplaced anger before he quickly shook it off. There was no reason to be angry about that, seeing as it was true. Hearing voices in your head wasn't exactly deemed as sanity, now was it?

"No, Neji, please. I need to know."

Neji regarded him suspicious for a little bit longer before sighing deeply and shifting his eyes back over the silhouette of the man, leaned back against the side of the metal building casually. "Well... He's always had creepy chakra, from having all those hearts you know."

"You *knew* he had five hearts!?"

"Well yeah. I mean, where else would he have all that chakra pumping in from? I mean he's super-fucking-strong, Shikamaru. No one has that much power without alternate sources. They're almost like spare batteries."

Shikamaru stared back at him incredulously. Neji had known the entire time, the *whole* fucking time they'd been living next to those two, that

Kakuzu was a goddamned monster with five fucking hearts, and yet *Hidan* was the one he hated? *Hidan* was the inhuman freak?

How the hell did that make sense?

"Anyway, it's always been really gross and smoggy, because he's got all these different colors mixing in together constantly. So it hard to see through, you know, but... it's kind of different now. Before, that one in the middle had always struck me as the original one, you know, it's the heart they're all connected to. But it's kind of distant now, like... I don't know how to explain it. Almost like the signal is weak on a radio, you know? It's still there, still doing it's job, but it's just... not as *there* as it was before. And there's this wierd little smudge on it that I've never noticed before..."

"A smudge?" Shikamaru questioned, trying to put this all together.

Right, it stood to reason that maybe something about the way the old mans chakra worked had been altered while he'd been held captive by jashinists all that time. Hell, he'd never actually explained how he got out of there, maybe he'd had to do something drastic with his last remaining heart. It had weakened it, or altered it, maybe... After all, Neji said everything was mostly the same, so that couldn't be too concerning.

"Yeah. That's really all I can think to describe it as. Just... kind of a dark spot. Almost like his chakra has a scar. But I'm pretty sure that's impossible..."

A scar on his chakra...

*" Like some little- know who- SON OF A BITCH KAKUZU!- You still think I'm stupid."*

"Neji, you probably didn't have your byakugan up after you first got here and we were all talking about the plan, did you?"

"No. Why?"

He didn't answer, his head was buzzing far too quickly. Something wasn't right here. These voices had been telling him to kill kakuzu since he first showed up. And now there was that wierd encrypted message, bits and pieces being repeated in his head. This wierd sinking feeling in his chest.

Something was wrong, and he knew it had something to do with the old man. But what?

He noticed him zoneing out during their conversation, the far-away look in his eyes he'd had, like he was daydreaming. But then he'd come back so suddenly, like he'd been paying perfect attention...

*"Tolerate that shit from Kuzu- our lord and savior- do it yourself."*

His hands came up to clasp the side of his head. This was too much. His moment of peace and happiness hadn't lasted long enough. He needed to talk to Hidan, but Hidan was busy trying to figure out how to defend himself.

Kakuzu was obviously the problem anyway, he was the cause of the voices now, and so he was the one who needed to start dishing out answers.

"Shikamaru? What's going on? Please tell me, maybe i can help."

"No.. I just... I can't."

Neji's brows dropped in anger, and he stepped up close to the Nara threateningly. "Shikamaru, have you seriously not learned to trust me yet? You can't keep doing this to yourself. You have people here to help you, let us help you, dammit. We came all this way."

Shika only stepped back, dropping his hands. He didn't have time to deal with Neji's stubborn attitude. He was grateful for it, really. And he understood what he was saying. But he didn't understand.

This simply wasn't something he could get help on. Not unless one of these men happened to be a therapist.

"I'll... be right back. " He said, ignoring Neji's growls of objection as he activated his shadow jump, being sucked down into the hole in the ground there in front of the brunette while he raged.

It was kind of a waste, he admitted, to use the technique to jump such a ridiculously short distance, but he didn't want to run the risk of Neji following him. At least this way he'd have a headstart.

He stepped out from the inky black hole that appeared in the wall, right next to the tanned-skinned man. He received no reaction at all, and once the jutsu had completed, he took a deep breath and mimic'd the man's position.

The two sat in silence for what felt like hours, staring ahead calmly at the three distant figures, at Hidan, trapped within Sasuke's body. Trying desperately to adapt, as he'd undoubtedly had to do many millions of times throughout his immortal life.

He could almost laugh, at the sheer ridiculousness of this situation. Two men, both forced into loving this lunatic, tricked into all these terrible scenarios time and time again, all to save a man who couldn't even die. This love, this humanity, these irrational thoughts and emotions that made them do the things they did... none of it made sense.

And yet, there was simply no other options.

"I don't know if I'm going to survive this..." Shikamaru mumbled, halfway talking to himself more so than the stoic man beside him.

"There is no other choice, boy. Stop your whining."

Shikamaru turned to look at him, trying to make sense of everything going through his mind.



"You haven't said a word to him, since he came back..." He thought out loud again, "I'm... it's wierd, I'll admit. But it's good to have him back, even if it looks like that idiot. I know it's him..."

"I'm aware of what's going on."

"Then why are you back here?"

"What would going out there do? I'm enjoying the peace and quiet, or I was, until you showed up."

"You're lurking back here like a creeper. It's wierd."

"I do not need to justify myself to the likes of you."

"Yeah.. you're right..." He admitted, getting only a grunt in response. He turned back to look at the men, bright sparks of light flashing every now and then as Hidan(Sasuke) continued to try mastering the lihgtning element.

"You said before that someone was telling you to kill me." Kakuzu said suddenly, somewhat surprsing Shikamaru. The man rarely ever initiated conversation.

"Yes. They still are."

"Who."

"The uh... The voices in my head. I don't know who it is..."

"And what do you make of that?" Kakuzu said, still not having turned even once to look at Shikamaru.

He considered this, trying to reign in the confusion and think clearly for a moment. Just one moment, that was all he needed. Just a little bit of clarity... "I don't know. I have no idea what to make of it. That's why I came back here, I have a question for you."

"I may not have an answer." Was the cryptic response.

"You chakra has changed." He pointed out.

"So I've heard."

"And Neji said you have a strange smudge in it. That was all he could describe it as, like a scar." Kakuzu did not give any sort of response, and so he continued on. "I was thinking, trying to figure this out. I'm not really the jealous type, or at least I never used to be. I know I've changed a lot, but I don't go around killing people just because I envy them... "

"Get to the point, boy."

"Well, I'm trying to figure out why my subconscious wants to kill you so badly. I mean, I have my not-so-rational moments. If it were actually me that wanted to you die, I think I would have tried to really kill you by now. We had that little sparring session, but I don't think it really counts. It was different before, when we were out in that field after you'd first come back. But this time, I wasn't mad, I didn't have any kind of murderous intent."

"I still haven't heard any question."

Shikamaru grimaced in irritation. Dammit, you old man, why can't you just work with me here? "The only thing I can think of is that it's some sort of instinct. Some subtle warning from Jashin, or... I don't even know what. So, What I'm wanting to know here is if we can trust you?"

"If you're trying to ask if I'm going to kill you in your sleep boy, then the answer is no. Your presence here doesn't have that much worth to me to go to such an effort."

"No, that's not what I'm asking."

"Then you need to be more specific."

"Alright, fine." He said, stepping off the wall and moving in front of the old man to force complete attention on him. Kakuzu's face darkened in annoyance, but he made no movement aside from that. "Itachi hasn't detected a change in your chakra. I haven't either. The only people who've noticed it are those who haven't had contact with you since you escaped the people who held you captive. So obviously, that was when it happened."

Kakuzu's eyes narrowed, but the Jashinist held his ground, his features hard as he stared right back.

"So what I'd like to know is what the hell happened that could have altered your chakra like that."

"I gave the story of what I went through to you already, boy."

"Yes, you did. But you never told us how you escaped. If they held you for that long, then obviously you were helpless. I want to know what occurred that gave you the chance to get your heart back inside your body so you could make a run for it."

Kakuzu's glare deepened, if that was possible, and this only worried the Nara further. He'd had to do something he didn't want to admit to, that much was obvious, and had pretty well been predicted. Desperate situations required desperate measures. Shikamaru was a killer himself, now, and he knew for a fact that Kakuzu had more than just a few peoples blood on his hands. Hell, they were both involved with a man who practically god off on murdering people. So surely that couldn't be what it was that he was ashamed of.

But what was worse than murder?

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A/N-

Yaay, finally another chapter. Short, I think. But at least it's something. It's probably really shitty, i'm sorry. My mind has been far elsewhere aside from my stories recently. I had to pretty much force

myself to sit down and get just this little bit done, and I only had the chance because I'm fucking sick AGAIN and had to stay home from work. Ugh... hate my life sometimes guys, but really... I have no right to complain.

Anyway, yeah.. there it is. Hope you like it, forgive the typos and shit, and don't forget to review.

Thanks for reading.

# Ignorance is not bliss

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## Come What May

"I don't care to relive that nightmare. I've put it behind me." Kakuzu finally answered after an eternity of stubborn glaring between the two.

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed, and he took a step closer. He wasn't afraid of the old man, even with the possibility of having his immortality revoked being thrown into this terrible mess. He could beat him, he was positive of this, if things brewed to a real fight between them. After all, he'd nearly won again in their spar, and that had been completely without the aid of Jashin.

But everything about this situation bothered him, every single little detail. Kakuzu had more or less saved his life, or at least saved him from experiencing the same torture Hidan had been being put through previous to his possession of Sasuke's body. And somewhere in the back of his mind, this had driven the man slightly higher on his meter of respect, though it did not change at all his dislike of him.

Then, The old bastard had gone so far as to comfort him in his small mental crisis, and then again had given him means of venting his relentless frustration after that.

It bothered him, as he said.

Shikamaru Nara may have forcibly been transformed into a cold-hearted killer, he may have the eyes of someone who had witnessed a soul leaving its body by the effort of his own hand, but he was still human. At least, he liked to tell himself as much, though such an opinion could be easily argued and disproved.

Perhaps it would be better explained to say he still *possessed* his humanity, though he had physically risen somewhat above it. His undying, and unreasonable love to Hidan being more than enough proof of that.

This was the part that bothered him. The mere fact that while he stood here staring at the man, he couldn't really feel the searing hatred he'd held for him before. And he knew without a doubt that it was because Kakuzu kept helping him, though he was not obligated to in any way. He'd stated already that it was in relation to his situation with Hidan, but then he had also made it clear that he was not the psycho's caretaker or guardian.

So why was it that he was volunteering for the role again and again?

"I don't know if you've noticed or not, but you've been being uncharacteristically nice."

"Not by my own choices, boy. "

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"As I said before, boy, I don't need to explain myself to you."

"Actually, you kind of do. Because, see, there's really nothing stopping me from listening to these little voices and just off-ing you. You're down to three hearts right now, and one of them is pretty badly damaged still. Meanwhile I'm completatly healed up and back in peak physical form. " He said nonchalantly, reciving a relighted burning glare from the older man. He only smirked at the silence, knowing he was correct in these assumptions.

"If I feel you're a threat, I could kill you and be perfectly justified to do so."

"You think Hidan would let-"

"I know you were watching, you really think he could stop me? You think anyone here could stop me if I was dead-set on putting your old ass in the ground? Give me some fucking credit, there's no one around for you to impress. I have every advantage over you right now."

More silence, but Shikamaru did not smile at it this time, he didn't want to kill Kakuzu. And he knew that the man before him was most likely completely aware of that. His threats were empty, but not unheard.

The old man seemed to smile a bit, a dark smirk that Shikamaru couldn't seem to completely read.

"If you think you have the gall to end my life, then get it over with." Kakuzu said, surprising the Nara with the submission.

"You want me to kill you?"

"I want you to stop wasting my time with your threats. If you're going to do it, then do it. Though I know that you won't."

"I don't understand."

"What is there to understand? If you see me as a threat, do your job and remove that threat. How are Hidan's *soul-mate*, after all. You have a duty to destroy those who might cause him harm."

Shikamaru's brows dropped, a small irritated flame starting up. Stupid old man, why couldn't he understand what was going on here? He did not *want* to kill him, all Shika was asking for was an explanation. Was it really so hard to give one?

"Just tell me how you escaped."

"Why?"

"Because I want to know."

"What good would it do to know that?"

"You're just making yourself more suspicious every time you refuse to answer." He snapped, finally letting his crossed arms fall to his sides in favor of lifting one hand to rub his eyes in annoyance. "Your chakra signature has changed." He said, holding out his left index finger. "You have a scar on the chakra of your original heart." Another finger extended. "You save my life and put me back together, even though you could have just as easily left me there to my own devices and removed me from both your life and Hidan's, saving yourself all this hassle." A third finger.

"And most importantly, You come with me on this search for Hidan, but then when he shows up again, you act like you'd rather him not even be here."

"Why would I be happy that he's here?"

"Why *wouldn't* you be!? Isn't that the whole point of all of this? Wasn't that the point of all that shit that happened before? You always, *always* come after him, you're like his knight in shining armor! Maybe he's not in his own body and this situation is seriously fucked, but he's here and he's safe and at least you have that consolation."

"He's not safe, boy. No one here is safe." Kakuzu said, unusually calmly despite Shikamaru's berating.

"And why is that?"

Kakuzu stared distantly at the ground for a long while before he spoke, stretching the Jashinist's patience unreasonably far, in his opinion. "You have never went up against the likes of Orochimaru, you wouldn't understand."

"What's this got to do with him?"



"He's the ringleader behind this circus, what kind of idiot would ask that? Of course he has something to do with it."

Shikamaru paused, the gears turning in his head. How had it even come to this? Was this some sort of test? Kakuzu was no idiot, as much as he hated to admit, how the hell had they ended up talking about Orochimaru when all he was asking was how he escaped from the jashinists-

His eyes widened slightly, regarded stoically as ever by the christmas colors of the man across from him.

*"It's very possible they may have been posing, in order to lure you into a trap..."* Itachi's voice echoed in his head.

*"They were followers of your putrid God..."* Kakuzu's voice rang. *"They disected me, did experiments, trying to figure out how to use my abilities as their own... I had the heart of a fucking pig in my chest..."*

*Tolerate that shit from Kuzu- Our lord and savior- Do it yourself*

He stared into Kakuzu's eyes, the man stared back. No... he didn't like where this train of thought was heading.

Altered chakra signature, a smudge on his original heart. People posing as Jashinists, genetic experimentation, curse marks, soul-switching...

*Nasty- Goddamn- Something planned- FUCKING KILL YOU!*

"Kakuzu.." he said, seeming to surprise the man. The thought flit through his head that he'd really never called him by his name, at least not that he could remember.

"How did you get out of there?" He asked, his voice terrifyingly even and quiet.

*YOU PINEAPPLE HEADED FUCK!- FUCKING- got him for you-  
HURRY THE FUCK UP AND KILL HIM, - I love you- don't think you  
know- damn- you really- another jashinists- WAKE THE FUCK UP!*

No... He had to be on the wrong track here. This couldn't be right. Stupid brain, stupid strategic brain, don't put the pieces together like that. That's not fair at all.

*Why not?*

He's an ally. He's too strong. Hidan... needs him.

***KILL HIM!***

"They put my heart back in my body, and let me go..." Kakuzu's deep voice finally ground out. "I killed them. Every last soul in that place, I destroyed everything, almost buried myself alive in the process. I thought that by ensuring no one survived, that the whole residence was thoroughly destroyed, that whatever trick they were planning would be ruined."

Shikamaru had no words, his breath was caught in his throat in his inner hysteria, only encouraged more by the fact that he was having a panic attack over something like this. Why was he so hurt by this realization? Why did it scare him so terribly?

*You fool, you didn't even notice...*

"I don't know what they did. I only know that I've been doing things that don't make sense, even to me. Never anything of consequence, but senseless none-the-less. Putting you back together being one of them."

*Even with all the warnings...*

The jashinist was still speechless, somehow still managing to keep his features unreadable. Kakuzu seemed to see through it though,

raising a brow in interest and what annoyed the Nara to see as amusement.

*Even with all the obvious signs...*

"Orochimaru was not there, his name was never spoke. On all accounts, they really might have been jashinists. I didn't have any sort of suspicions until Hidan stole that boy's body, and he immediatly came to me asking for help."

*You've lost it. You're not even yourself now, you're just like Hidan. Oblivious Hidan. Oblivious Shikamaru...*

"You think..." Shikamaru forced out, but then unable to say anything more due to his lungs refusing to expand again.

"I am the one he leans on for support. I am the one who comes to rescue him, there is no doubt that I would accompany whatever rescue party pursued him..."

"You... you knew..." He whispered, willing his lungs to reinflate for lack of anything else to do in this situation.

"Your instincts, your god, want you to kill me... You and Hidan are both so keen on that asenine God, yet here, the one time when you *should* be listening, you go against him? I find it pathetic that this problem had to be preactically spelled out to you, given the reputation you'd made for yourself as some sort of genius."

Silence stretched between them, as Shikamaru tried to reel in and organize his thoughts. Orochimaru had not taken over Sasuke's body only to switch it with Hidan's, he'd known what was happening because he was tapped into the conversation they'd had. When Kakuzu had gone distant, when he'd seemed troubled by the comment of people posing as Jashinists...

His eyes widened slightly, a pang of pain shooting through his chest.

"Now tell me boy. Will you dispose of this threat? Or keep it for your idiotic, sentimental justifications? It pains me to admit it to the likes of you, but I have no idea how much control I've retained over myself."

Kakuzu was a sleeper-agent. Unknowingly double-crossing every single person on this mission.

No... this isn't fair. Sasuke, maybe. But Kakuzu...

Oh god, it had all been a scheme, from the very first day Kakuzu had gone missing. It had all been a ploy to get close to Hidan. They'd taken Kakuzu, not to try and find immortality, not because they couldn't touch Hidan, but because he knew all the secrets, because he was Hidan's protector, his bodyguard, his lover, his rescuer. The tactician behind his ability to remain alive despite his immortality. He was the only person the immortal trusted, the only person who would have been able to sit and wait patiently until Hidan revealed how he'd gained his immortality, revealed some weak point that would enable them to steal it.

Without even meaning to, they had prompted Hidan into doing just that, by removing Kakuzu from his life, he was driven by mere animalistic instinct to find someone else.

He'd found Shikamaru.

But Kakuzu had not been there, Orochimaru had no way of knowing, until finally they let him go, and he'd gotten the information they needed.

This whole time, all these six months have been nothing but a chance to plan out a way to capture the two jashinists. He'd been gathering information, waiting in secret until Hidan had to leave and meet with this other jashinist.

They'd captured Hidan... oh God... Kakuzu had probably helped, for all anyone knew. And then they'd sent him after Shikamaru, not even aware of what he was doing. And now, he was bringing him,

practically serving him up on a silver platter, delivering him right into Orochimaru's hands, and without anyone even knowing...

"Oh... shit..." Shikamaru breathed, before Kakuzu's eyes went unfocused, and a grin that was clearly not his stretched across his stitched features.

"I was afraid of this happening. Such a pity, we were so close to making this endeavor nice and smooth... You're too sharp for your own good, Shikamaru Nara..."

---

Off in the clearing, well out of hearing range, Neji watched his ex and the older man talk. He wanted to get closer, wanted to study Kakuzu's chakra better, because something had occurred to him after Shikamaru had left. But he waited, Shikamaru obviously did not want him to follow, or he would not have used that crazy jutsu that sapped his chakra reserves at a ridiculous rate. And honestly, he was still somewhat terrified of the old man. So he waited, turning his attention back to the psycho and his lover's older sibling as they tried to straighten things out.

Hidan(Sasuke) Had successfully created a sword out of lightning-based chakra, swinging it wildly around in the air and laughing like a maniac. He'd watched Itachi sigh wearily, grabbing Hidan's wrist and clenching it so hard that he was forced to drop the technique. Hidan shouted out swears in Sasuke's voice, glaring at the man in the darkness with Sharingan alighted finally.

He ripped his hand from the man's hold, and Neji moved back over to the two as Itachi gestured to him.

"Where did Shikamaru go?" The Uchiha asked calmly, averting his eyes as Sasuke(Hidan) turned around and reactivated his lightning sword, his face then clenching in concentration before the shape morphed itself into that of a scythe.

"Holy shit! This is badass! Why the fuck can't pineapple head do this!?" He said, swinging the glowing weapon a few times before the energy seemed to be absorbed back into his hand. He turned around just as Neji replied.

"He went to talk to Kakuzu." He nodded his head in the two's direction at this.

"I see. I wasn't aware that Kakuzu had not gone back to bed."

"I didn't notice him right away either..." He said, brows furrowing in concern. Shikamaru had been deeply bothered by his sudden presence, and by the description Neji had given him of the man's chakra. He'd also mentioned that Deidara and Sasori had noticed that his chakra changed. But he didn't say anything about Itachi, who was also in the Akatsuki and should also have noticed.

"It's wierd that his signature has changed like that, isn't it?" He said, testing the theory.

"Tch, what the fuck do you mean, changed?" Hidan(Sasuke) blurted out rudely.

Neji gave him a brief glare, but kept his attention on Itachi, who reinforced his belief that Itachi was unaware of the change with his slightly confused stare.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about either." He admitted.

The Hyuga put his hand to his chin, turning to look at the two distant glowing chakra figures as he did so.

Shikamaru had made some sort of connection. Even after all these years, after they'd changed so drastically, he could still recognize that much. And judging by the way he'd grabbed Neji so suddenly like that, it was not a good connection. And this was not a good thing, because he knew for himself how strong Kakuzu was. He'd

heard the ground quaking as he and Shikamaru had been sparring, he'd felt the static in the air as powerful attacks were exchanged back and forth, he'd felt the raw power in Kakuzu's attack when he'd intervened their fight and accidentally made himself out to be an enemy.

Chakra signatures don't just change. One's chakra, their life energy, the essence of their soul, didn't not just spontaneously become something else. That could only be caused by...

He glanced at Sasuke's body, staring at him, suddenly serious as a heart attack, looking almost thoughtful in his silence.

It could only be caused by genetic experimentation. To change ones chakra they had to change something about the source of their chakra. Which is generally considered to be a mixture of the heart and brain, as these two organs are what keeps the body alive.

"You haven't noticed it?" He said solemnly, not likeing this terrible weight he was feeling in his chest now. "It's not the same as it was. I lived next to him for all that time, I know I'm not mistaken. It's different. Shikamaru asked me about it just before he ran off..."

Itachi's expression grew serious. "And what was it that you told him?"

Sasuke(Hidan) was still quiet in between the two, his eyes focused on the distant figure, jaw twitching as if he were grinding his teeth. His eyes flicked around as if scanning, while never really leaving the spot they were centered on.

"I told him what I saw. It's nothing drastic, but it's enough that it changed the feel. His middle heart, I think it's his original one, isn't the center of his chakra anymore, like the force has been dulled, and he's got this wierd black smudge..." He trailed off, eyes flicking to Hidan(sasukes) exposed neck, and the curse mark serving as a portal for the red chakra to leak through.

Then his gaze met Itachi's who's eyes had gone slightly wider in alarm. "Neji Hyuga, does this change in his chakra feel similar to the change that occurs when Sasuke has an attack from the curse mark?"

Neji opened his mouth to answer, but then jerked away from the sudden explosion of red that burst from the body next to him.

"Pineapple head!" Sasuke's voice snarled with such a viciousness that Neji instinctively leaped backward. As he did a blood-red blur suddenly blew past him, knocking him from a controlled leap into a flailing somersault by mere air pressure alone.

His eyes flashed open, and he lowered the arms he'd lifted to cover his face as he looked up with dizzy vision to see Itachi checking him over.

"What the hell-"

"I believe we've fallen for a very elaborate trap. That's as much explanation as I can give right now.." Itachi said quickly, pulling the man to his feet and whirling around. "Hidan is going after Shikamaru. We need to assist him." He grabbed the brunettes hand and took off at a dead sprint as he spoke.

"What.. why? What's going on?" Neji said breathlessly as he got his feet under him and moved to run alongside itachi.

"I can't believe I didn't see it before..." Itachi mumbled.

"DIDN'T SEE WHAT!?" Neji cried, too dazed to realize he'd blinked the Byakugan off. It didn't help that the red chakra flowing from Sasukes lean body that was rocketing toward the safehouse was pouring out in such mass amounts that it didn't even require his visual prowess to see it.

"This whole time we were looking at Sasuke as a possible saboteur, when this whole time it's been Kakuzu..." Itachi muttered, glancing



over to Neji before doing a double-take. "Neji! You must keep your byakugan on! I realize we've been training you not to use it in battle, but you're our only hope of differentiating between all this body-swapping madness."

Neji's eyes widened, though he didn't even turn to regard the older Uchiha, and he reactivated his eyes, gasping as they drew closer and closer to where Shikamaru and Kakuzu, and now Sasuke(Hidan) were.

He was shocked to see that disgusting inky black chakra had completely overtaken what had once been Kakuzu. And as they fell closer, he realized that Shikamaru too, was forcibly having the disgusting gunk pumped into several of his chakra junctions via the multitude of threads piercing his body.

Hidan(Sasuke) was snarling in an animalistic rage, swinging the scythe that had been returned to him wildly at the elder man, who only laughed enigmatically as the weapon collided and with and bounced off of some sort of forcefield around the Nara and himself.

"Shikamaru..." He gasped weakly as they arrived close enough to properly discern what was happening.

His ex wasn't moving, his body standing in a pose that would result in him falling backward were he not held somewhat into a halfway standing position by the many strings invading his body. His mouth gaped open, as if trying to scream in pain, but unable to, with his eyes nearly bugged out as the nasty blackness pumped itself from Kakuzu's body into his.

"I find this little theory you have most interesting, Dearest Mister Nara..." Kakuzu said in Kakuzu's voice, but not in his speech pattern. His christmas colored eyes flicked over to where Itachi and Neji stood, too caught in utter bewilderment for the moment to make any immediate assessments. "He thinks perhaps he and Hidan have become mortal now, since little Sasuke is lending him his body. This

is an occurrence I hadn't really taken into account." He nearly purred, wearing a devious, ugly grin.

"I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Sasuke(Hidan) shrilled, the desperation beginning to show in his voice as he continued his useless swinging of the lightning-laced scythe.

"Oh hush, you." Kakuzu said lightheartedly, turning to smirk at him as well. "I'm upset with you. I put you in that body to toy with them, I didn't count on not being able to pull you back out. And now I have no clue as to where poor Sasuke's soul has run off to." He sighed dramatically, but then shrugged his shoulders. "It's not as if you're able to do anything though. Look at you, poor little Jashinist. It must be awful to feel so useless in that body, even with that impressive chakra. This God of yours must be terribly cruel..." He trailed off, then giving them all a malicious grin. "I like that."

Sasuke screeched out more unintelligible, wrathful words, doubling his attempts to break through whatever barrier had been set up around Shikamaru and the possessed body of Hidan's lover.

"I must admit I'm disappointed. With how you two completely dismantled half of my workforce, I expected so much more of a fight from you... I'd heard such good things." He said, feigning sadness as his gaze refocused on the stiff with pain man in front of him. "But, I suppose that just makes it easier for me. I've been so patient, you know..."

Itachi stepped forward finally. "Hidan! Stop attacking! It's not going to do anything."

Sasuke(Hidan) continued his meaningless assault, the Uchiha's words going completely unheeded in his rage. He screamed and raged and shrilled as he struck again and again at the forcefield, finally after awhile tossing the scythe aside, letting his bare hands glow with that sudden flood of red chakra he was receiving and punching and clawing in continued futility as he screamed and snarled.

"Itachi... " Kakuzu laughed, completely unaffected by the desperate attempts of the younger Uchiha/elder Jashinist. "So good to see you again. You look well."

Itachi said nothing, only glaring his darkest, sharingan laced glare at the man for response.

Kakuzu's possessed body only laughed in a cheery manner that disturbed everyone there to see coming from the stoic old man. "Don't be too discouraged. You really did a number on me, it took years upon years for me to get back to even half of my former self. But I already informed you that day that it would not be so easy to kill me. "

"Release Shikamaru, or I will put you through it a second time." Itachi said darkly. Neji remained slightly behind him, doing his best to ignore his panic and search desperately for some kind of way to break through the barrier. It only had a very fine layer of chakra, which confused him terribly. He wasn't aware of any other sort of magic in this world aside from jutsu, yet this forcefield was some sort of mixture between. And that being so, he could find no way to break through it.

"Mmm... no. I don't think I will. I need him, you see. Because this stubborn little moron over here has somehow effectively kept me from entering his mind and thus finally ending my search for eternal life." He said, gesturing to the Sasuke/Hidan mixture who had finally ceased his attacks, and was now bent over, attempting to catch his breath. He did look up and let out a growl at Kakuzu/Orochimaru's words, though.

"But I was fortunate enough to find out that this boy here," He said, nodding to Shikamaru, who was more relaxed now, but appeared to be in some sort of trance. "Well, he killed my favorite servant, who was very close to delivering all the information I needed. Had he not sacrificed poor Kabuto, I wouldn't have had to go through all the trouble of trying to pry information from Hidan's mind. I could have skipped straight ahead and saved everyone the headache."

He withdrew the threads from Shikamaru's body now, grinning like a child in a toy factory. "There! It worked, after all!" He said to the younger Jashinist, who was standing at attention now, staring blankly at Kakuzu.

Neji's breathing was reaching the point where he couldn't seem to draw enough air into his lungs. That disgusting black chakra was wrapped completely around his ex's dark violet, exactly the same way Hidan's was wrapped around Sasuke's. He didn't have control of his body any longer, Neji realized. And this man, Orochimaru, using Kakuzu as his catalyst, was going to kidnap him and do all the terrible things to him that they'd done to the psycho.

"Listen here motherfucker..." Sasuke growled, pushing himself against the transparent bubble. "You better let them go *right fucking now* or you're going to suffer the worst kind of fucking hell I can put you through."

Orochimaru only scoffed and rolled his eyes. Then, in the blink of an eye, he waved his hand, and the forcefield vanished. At this same time he made a gesture to Shikamaru's hypnotized body, and the Nara lunged forward, creating a pike in his hand with his shadow jutsu. Without hesitation, he shoved it through Sasuke/Hidan's throat.

Neji cried out, blinking his byakugan off for the terrible fear of witnessing any more of this nightmare. He shut his eyes, refusing to acknowledge the hot tears streaming down his cheeks.

Itachi shouted and lunged toward them, but in that same instant, another translucent wall of energy popped back up over the three. It was the Uchiha's turn to rage now, shouting Sasuke's name, Hidan's name, Shikamaru's name, and pounding on the invisible plane with bare fists.

Kakuzu laughed sarcastically again, looking down at the Hidan/Sasuke mixture, now rolling on the ground choking and gargling as he clutched at the heavily bleeding wound in his neck.

"I can't get you out of that body on my own, but I'm sure activating the curse seal would eject you. I much more prefer Sasuke's company to yours, so annoying, you are."

At these very words, the younger brothers skin began darkening down to a grey again, steam rising from the wound on his neck as it healed itself, and his wide eyes flashing to that feline appearance.

Shikamaru stood loyally and emotionlessly beside him, looking down in complete disinterest. Neji stared on in horror. "P-please... Shika..." He whispered, knowing that calling out to him wouldn't do any more good than it had for Hidan or Itachi. "Please don't..."

"And this way you can help me transport mister Nara here back to my facility." He said, waving to Shikamaru as those handshaped wings cracked disgustingly out of his shoulderblades, and his teeth sharpened and elongated. "I was going to just wait for you all to show up, ambush you, and kill you. So this is really quite a bother, but I had worked it into my plans should someone catch on. I decided that at this point, it really wouldn't matter if you followed me or not. I've more than enough weapons at my disposal." He said, sneering down at Kakuzu's hands.

"But, it seem your two more useless associates are about to come intervene. So I need to be off. Nara, be a dear and use that neat little jutsu you have. A 'Shadow-jump', I think you and Hidan call it."

Shikamaru nodded with his blank expression, reaching out now to grasp the fully-transformed Sasuke's hand, and then Kakuzu's. Then, with one finally sickly-sweet smile from Kakuzu, all three melted down into a tarry puddle on the ground, with the forcefield fading away shortly after.

Itachi collapsed on the ground, striking at it just once with his fist. Neji follwoed suit, though much less gracefully, covering his eyes as he sobbed uncontrollably.

No words could even describe his thoughts at the moment, so jumbled and hopeless they were. He'd taken Sasuke, He'd taken Shikamaru, and even at this point he wasn't dumb enough not to realize that if they pursued them, they would be fighting not only those two, who were completely under some spell by the man, but likely Hidan and Kakuzu as well, both taken hostage.

Finally, at this moment, Deidara and Sasori came bursting through the doors and rounded the corner, the blonde one still wiping sleep from his eyes even as he jogged over to them.

Sasori stopped as soon as his eyes alighted on Itachi's pitiful, crouched figure, illuminated only by moonlight. Deidara, as always, was not so quick to analyze.

"What the fuck happened, hm? We heard shouting and all kinds of shit, and felt this wierd creepy chakra... Where the fuck is Kakuzu and that psycho in the tool's body, yeah?" He said, looking around for a second longer before adding Shikamaru to the list as well.

"They're gone..." Neji whispered pathetically, letting his hands fall away in surrendur.

"Gone? Gone how, hm?"

"Just... just gone..." Neji repeated weakly.

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A/N-

Mreeeee oh noooo, that's rather unfortunate isn't it..

Bleh, kinda short chapter again, but whatever. I'm really sorry guys, I've just had soooo much other random crap on my mind. It's hard to focus enough to sit down and write. It seriously took me like a 4 days to finish this chapter. Mainly because I've been so focused on my other fic and kind of had to get myself back in the mindset for this one. I'm still not very pleased with what I have, but meh, it'll have to

do. No offense to any of you, but I really have more important things to fuss over.

DESPITE THAT! Shits starting to get real ehh? Like I said, I blow my own mind with this stuff. Like really, I seriously only make like these generalized based plans, more of just direction for the fic to head in, and everything else just magically comes together without me really even having to try.

It's a gift, I guess. xD

So, forgive typos, I love you, aaaand please reviewww!

# It's not over

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## Come What May

"We have to follow them, Itachi, can't you follow? Shikamaru's technique is jutsu, you should be able to-"

"I failed again..." Itachi interrupted, nothing but a sobbing mess on the ground. Sasori and Deidara could only stand to the side, still wrapped in confusion.

Neji clenched his fists and dove down to him, wrapping one of the man's arms around his shoulder. "GET UP! We have to follow them!" Tears still streamed down his cheeks, voice cracking as he yelled at the grief-stricken man, as if more volume would suddenly snap him out of whatever uncharacteristic guilt-session he was in now.

They were gone, yes, but not lost. They had to be able to follow them, Itachi *had* to be able to jump them there. He was Itachi fucking Uchiha, he could do anything. He was everyone's hero. And this was no time for him to finally give up, Not with Shikamaru and Sasuke captured. There was still hope, there *had* to be hope.

"Can one of you two explain what the fucking hell is happening, hm?" Deidara barked as Sasori finally moved to help Neji lift Itachi to his feet.

"Kakuzu betrayed us. He was a sleeper agent this whole time, just like Sasuke." Neji explained frantically, moving around in front of the elder brother and grabbing his chin, forcing the man's distant eyes to meet his. "Itachi please! You're the only one who can do it!"

"WHAT!?"

"Kakuzu?" Sasori said, his voice eliciting confusion though his face remained impassive. "That can't be correct. He would never-"



"Orochimaru must have put a curse seal on him when he was captured..." Itachi said breathlessly, his eyes finally starting to flicker back to life. "He couldn't have known... It was a trap. Every second of it, we all walked right into it... "

"It doesn't fucking matter right now, we have to go after them!"

"Neji." Itachi said calmly, stepping back and staring at him with a lifelessness the Hyuga had never witnessed in him before. "He took Shikamaru, Kakuzu is under his control, Those two were our most powerful members. And now he has Sasuke, I... I cannot fight my own brother..."

"So you're going to give up!?"

"All we would be doing is charging directly into certain death..." He breathed out in a weak sob.

Neji let go of him to whirl away and storm into a pace, throwing his arms up and screaming. "Bullshit! This is bullshit! You're the good guys!" He shouted, twisting back to the three men staring at each other, confused and depressed. "The Akatsuki is *not* a criminal organization. You save people from people like Orochimaru, people who abuse jutsu. You can't just stop now, even if we die, we can't just... we can't... "

"I'm so sorry, Neji... I... I didn't know or I would not have brought you, I should never have brought Sasuke. It was exactly what he wanted."

"NO!" Neji Shouted, coming to stand before him again. He wouldn't let this happen. He couldn't. He would *not* be helpless again, even if he wasn't the one in trouble this time. Not after everything Shikamaru had done to make sure he stayed alive, not after everything Sasuke had been through. He would not let Itachi give up, even if it meant he would die. What else was life anyway but an everlasting struggle. Everyone was always fighting for another day, even those damn immortals. That's just what you did, you fought and

fought, because when you give up you're nothing. Even death doesn't want a useless nobody. He knew, he'd tried to kill himself long ago.

Shikamaru would never give up, *had* never given up. Even when there was barely hope of success he found a way. Even when he had sworn himself to a god that turned him into something he didn't want to be, even when that fucking psycho turned his back on him and left him all alone to deal with the mess he'd gotten himself into by himself, he had kept going. He'd given his soul to save Neji, and the brunette would do nothing less. He was not useless anymore, he was not a coward.

"There has to be something, Itachi. There has to be a way. You beat him before-"

"I beat him on a one-on-one, and even then I barely made it out alive! Sasuke's life was not at stake. He didn't have two immortals fighting for him, Neji. The odds are far too high, we cannot win this one. If we go charging in there he might just Kill my brother for the sheer joy of it!" Itachi's voice had been continually raising in his hysteria, cracking on the last bit.

"He might kill him anyway!" Neji countered. "What if he takes Hidan and Shikaamru's immortality huh? What if he finds a way to get it, then there really will be no hope left. Not for us, and not for fucking humanity! You killed your entire clan to save everyone, Itachi, You have to help us!"

"Wait a minute here..." Deidara said, putting his hands up. "I was okay when we had the advantage. But if I'm following correctly here, hm. I'm not so sure I want to continue being a part of this."

"You don't have a choice!" Neji snapped again. "Why am I the only one seeing that this isn't about Shikamaru or Sasuke anymore? I don't even *know* this fucking Orochimaru guy. Everyone here knows that I fucking *despise* Hidan, but if Orochimaru gets his power... That

psycho is an idiot, Orochimaru outsmarted *all of us*. If he gets that power..." He said again, trailing off.

Itachi sighed finally. "Your ability to remain level-headed while under extreme stress is astounding, Neji Hyuga. Perhaps bringing you along was a godsend after all." With that, he stood up straight again and cleared his throat, turning to Sasori. "We are going to need more assistance."

Sasori nodded. "I'll contact Nagato."

"And I will call for Kisame. His ability to drain the chakra of opponents will be needed."

"I'll get my sword." Neji said, sprinting back into the building.

No thoughts. No thinking, he couldn't spare the energy. He had to just *do*. He wasn't Shikamaru, his mind couldn't work as quickly as his, but dammit, he was no fool either. He could do this, he had the Akatsuki behind him, he would finally be the one to save Shikamaru, and he would help Sasuke too.

He would do it, or die trying.

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"So this is what's going to happen..." The man pacing in front of Shikamaru said smoothly, his hands behind his back as he moved, completely relaxed, back and forth of the immortal tied to a metal chair with chakra-cancelling handcuffs around him.

"You are going to help me, whether you cooperate or not. I'm offering you this only because it would make things go so much more smoothly if I had your assistance."

"Fuck you." He said breathlessly. The foreign chakra still swirling within him had resisted its presence enough for him to think straight, but it still remained there. His stomach churned continuously, his body ached and groaned against the disgusting feeling energy inside

him, trying to disable it, to push it out. He resisted wave after wave of nausea.

Shikamaru had no idea how he'd gotten here, one moment he was talking to Kakuzu, and he'd smiled at him in that heart-stopping way. The next thing he knew he was here, in this chair, unable to move or even mould his own chakra, what with the metal bands around his wrists and ankles and the dark, disgusting presence coursing under his skin.

He didn't know what happened, but he could only assume that Kakuzu had lost that control, and he'd done something to the Nara to knock him out, despite the immortality that usually kept him at least one-millionth of a percent conscious even when his heart was stopped. The man before him, with long black hair down to his waist, snake-like eyes and ridiculous face makeup, he could only assume he was the ring-leader being all this. This was the man everyone was talking about, Orochimaru.

"Oh no, no thank you. You're not my type, but I appreciate the offer." Orochimaru replied with a sick smile, stopping in front of him and bending to force their eyes to meet. "You need to understand something, Shikamaru. Your friends are not going to rescue you from this, and you cannot save yourself. I've spent *years* researching your little lover and his abilities, so much time tediously planning this little party, I'm far more knowledgeable on the matter than you. " He stood up straight again, looking down at the jashinist with interest, tapping a finger to his cheek. "The only thing I don't understand is how you and that vulgar idiot can keep me from tapping into your brain. I couldn't even get him to do my bidding, he's extremely strong-willed. I suppose a person would have to be after living for hundreds and hundreds of years. But you..." He paused a moment to let out a chuckle. "You're not so resilient. He resisted my control technique, you did not. I saw a fraction into your mind, but that is not enough. I do enjoy a good torture and interrogation, but I'm so bored with this game, Shikamaru. Won't you just tell me what your secret is so we can be done with it?"

"I'm going to kill you." Shikamaru said breathlessly, resisting the urge to vomit. He had to get this chakra out of himself. He had to get mad, he needed Jashin's power, but he couldn't seem to do that. The slaughter God was still not responding. Dammit, damn Jashinism and all it's ironic rules. Jashin hated those who couldn't help themselves, but what the fuck did he expect in situations like this!? He was supposed to be He and Hidan's ace in the hole, the thing that would keep them alive when nothing else would. And yet he seemed to have excused himself from this whole situation.

"How do you plan to do that? You're helpless. Your God is not answering. That's not surprising though, considering that he's not actually real."

Shikamaru's teeth ground. He worked his hands, twisting in his restraints to no avail while his eyes flicked around the empty room. He had to get angry, he needed to get pissed, and this bastard was going to help him.

"I used to think he wasn't real either, until I witnessed his power. Until I felt it run through me. You have no idea what you're messing with."

"Oh I think I do. I know far more about your religion than you do, isn't that funny? Your god isn't real, Shikamaru Nara. I mean that in every literal sense. Real beings of higher power actually hold no power at all, they are omnipotent, they have no influence, and even when they do, there are no such thing as miracles."

The Nara forced out a laugh. "You're the stupidest smart person I've ever met, you know?"

"I feel the same way about you. You're such a disappointment, still fighting me even when you know yourself that there is no way out of this. It will be much more comfortable for you to just cooperate with me." He knelt down, grabbing Shikamaru's knees and squeezing, giving him a murderous sneer as he did so. "But you are far more intelligent than Hidan. Which means you will be much more likely to

believe the truth when you hear it. And that is how I will break you, little jashinist, with the truth."

"Don't fucking touch me."

"I'd be happy to oblige you if you'd do the same for me." He said nonchalantly, standing back up. "Now, I learned through mister Kakuzu that you and Hidan somehow made this bond you have through the sharing of blood while you two were mutually inside a circle. That leads me to believe it can only be transferred between two Jashinists like yourselves. This is the hardest part for me, to submit myself to a false god who's not even a god at all. I understand that one has to believe in him for him to have any power over you, but I just can't seem to do that. So I need your help."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Again, no thank you. Your obsession with sex is intriguing, but I'm not interested. Now, Jashinism is more popular than you think, but Hidan is a very special kind of Jashinist. No one else had the gift that he has, or anything even remotely similar to it. Jashin gets his power from those that believe in him, you see, and most of those people were here under my command, once I broke the news to them, poof, he's gone. You've noticed, haven't you?"

Shikamaru could only glare up at him. Grinding his teeth so hard he feared they might lodge themselves up into his brain. That would hurt to live with the rest of his immortal life. Jashin *had* been absent, but how the hell did this fucker know this? Surely it was all some game, it was all some sort of trick. He'd been repeatedly warned not to underestimate the man, that he was clever. It had to be some farse. He knew his god, dammit... even though he really didn't know all that much...

"He's like a leech, you see, he saps just a little bit of energy from each and every follower, and then gets the rest from the sacrifices. That's how he keeps you alive. True immortality does not exist, there's always rules or a catch. But this is the intriguing part, if you

and little Hidan lost your belief in him... do you think it would cancel out everything he's given you? I've found that most belief comes only from ignorance. Once a person has been educated and the facts have been laid out for them, their faith is never the same."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." He growled, again trying in vain to twist his hands free of their bindings. *Don't let him get into your head. You exhausted, you haven't eaten in a very long time, this whole mix up has you completely drained, but for the love of Jashin, don't let him get into your head, Shikamaru.*

"That's exactly my point." Orochimaru replied, getting down on his knees again in front of the youngest immortal. "I'll say it again, Shikamaru Nara. Jashin... is not real. Would you like me to elaborate? "

"I'm not falling for your mind games. You can't tell me he's not real, I was stabbed directly through the heart and here I am. The only ignorant one here is you."

The man before him sighed and put a palm over his eyes, chuckling into it. "No, you're not understanding what I'm saying here, dearest mister Nara. Jashin's effects on you, yes, they're undeniable. But your god is no more a god than the jutsu you use is some kind of wild magic. Do you understand this? Jashinism as you know it is nothing more than an allegory."

Shikamaru sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. This was getting annoying, seriously. "Okay... I don't know why the Akatsuki treats you like some evil genius. You're starting to piss me off with all this rambleing."

Stars and red exploded behind his eyes then, the side of his face burst violently into pain, jerking his head to the side, making him feel almost as if his very neck had snapped and his head had fallen right off his body. He blinked a few times, tasting the sweet flavor of blood leaking into his mouth. It ran down his throat in his daze, choking him briefly before his body's instincts pushed him into a coughing fit and

suddenly he was staring at a small puddle of the crimson liquid on the concrete floor.

He blinked a few times, and raised his head to give the man standing now in front of him an incredulous look. Orochimaru only smiled back, slapping the billy-club in his right hand repeatedly into the palm of his other. *Where the hell had that come from?* "In Kakuzu's memories, you never boasted such sarcasm and disrespect. Hidan's influence on you has been nothing but bad. I don't understand why you're so fond of him. All he ever does is make your life hell. " He caught the club one more time and breathed out heavily, cocking his hip and slinging the thing up to rest on his shoulder. "This is the most blunt of all my torture devices, by the way, the rest are much more devious-looking. I always start with this one though, it breaks bones so irreparably, except on you immortals."

Shikamaru was wracked with another cough, and he spit out another wad of pink onto the ground, glaring at his captor the entire time.

"You're still easier to question though. Anyway, here's another conundrum I'm struggling with. If your god survives by belief, and you were granted the gift of immortality from him, and you stopped believing, do you lose that gift? Now it wouldn't be so hard to test the theory on you, but someone like Hidan, well he might just crumble into dust, and because you two are bonded, I'm a little afflicted as to whether I should use you as a guinea pig or not. So, what I need from you remains the same. Tell me how you did it."

"You already know what happened."

"Yes, yes you exchanged each other's blood while in the circle, I'm aware of that technique, many of the Jashinists I had working for me did that, it was so annoying, corpses everywhere. they kept killing each other afterward. But there is something missing here, I don't believe it's so simple. See, If Hidan gets blood in his mouth it could sabotage all the work we've put into holding him captive, and I'm not about to accidentally grant one of my underlings immortality as a test



subject. I'm sure you of all people understand that there can be no errors."

He pushed the thought from his mind, he wouldn't let himself even think it, in case that disgusting chakra was working to transferr his thoughts to Orochimaru. The extra ingredient that had occurred between them while they were accidentally performing this ritual. It wasn't even about keeping immortality from the bastard, even the thought of Hidan and this man together in that way... Oh Jashin... He didn't want to think about it, and he *couldn't*.

"You cannot survive without sacrificing souls, or each other, so we *are* under somewhat of a time llimit here, but from what I understand, you have an entire six months of interrogation ahead of you before that happens. I do hate to be patient for that much longer, but I also enjoy the sight of blood just as much as you do, Mister Nara."

"I'll be out of here as soon as you turn your back... Itachi won't-"

He was intereupted by obnoxious laughter. " *Itachi!* Hah, he can't do anything. he may have tricked you into thinking he is your friend, but he cares only for his brother. Even if my some strange coincidence he does find the gall for some asenine rescue mission, all I have to do is return Sasuke to him and he won't bother with you. I'll say it again, though I do hate to repeat myself. You, are, *alone*, Shikamaru Nara. Now that I have you, you will not be leaving this place as anything other than a corpse."

"You're a terrible negotiator. Why would I tell you anything if there's no way out for me anyway?" He snarled, lurching forward in his chair with teeth bared. He was angry, but dammit, not angry enough.

"Well at least we're making progress now that you understand that much." Orochimaru said nonchalantly, whirling around to the heavy door behind him. "I'm bored with you, I think I'll go have another look inside that 'protector' of yours and Hidan's. He's so weak, considering his age and experience..."

Shikamaru's brows dropped, he almost wanted to tell the bastard to leave Kakuzu alone. But that asshole had betrayed all of them, knowing he was a sleeper-agent and waiting until the last moment to even say anything. of course the voices in his head had kept urging the Jashinist to kill him... And maybe he would, if he ever got out of here...

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Neji didn't like this transportation Jutsu, though he had to admit it was faster. Again he was flying through what seemed to him like space and time itself, nothing more than a bodiless entity. Itachi had said that 'one gets used to it after awhile' but he didn't want to get used to it. He was perfectly fine with conventional means of travel, though he had to admit this was much faster, and far more practical than running, at the moment. Especially in the current situation that they were in.

When his feet hit the ground this time, he didn't feel the urge to vomit, then again he also wasn't drunk or dealing with a slight hangover. When he opened his eyes and the effects and memory of the jutsu faded away, they were standing in front of a cliff-face, jutting upward at a 90 degree angle. He stared at it for a few moments, squinting in the darkness. Immediately he concluded that there must be some sort of secret entrance, he didn't really have the time or patience to question Itachi's sense of direction, mainly for the fact that he knew the older brother would never fuck around on anything as serious as this.

"Blow a goddamned hole in it." he said to the blonde. That was what the man-woman did, right? He blew things up. That's what he remembered from all those years ago when they'd lived across the street from the psycho's, back when life had been normal, and good. he sighed internally for a second at that thought, at the time he'd hated the situation, but considering what he was going through now, he'd give anything just to go back to that...

"Uhh, that might make the whole damned cliff collapse..."

"You're a freeking terrorist and you're worried about making a *mess*? We don't have time to find some hidden fucking door, just start blowing shit up until we find our way in!" he snapped, whirling to the blonde and stepping up to him so that he was mere inches from his face, wondering idley to himself when he'd become the leader of this operation.

Deidara smiled at him and took a step back, glancing to Sasori who looked as bored out of his mind as usual. "I think I like this kid, yeah!" He piped.

"Neji..." Itachi said in that quiet but loud voice of his. "If we start doing demolition and the cliff falls apart it may very well cave in the entrance."

"Then we'll blow it up some fucking more! We don't have time for this! That sick fucker has Sasuke and Shikamaru, god knows what kind of fucked up things he's doing to them in there, you heard what the psycho told the blonde, all the terrible stuff they did to him! We can't let that happen."

"Hah! I *really* like this kid! I vote with him, hm." Deidara chuckled again.

"Shut up, Brat." Sasori murmured behind him, rolling his eyes.

"I understand that Neji." Itachi said lowly, looking almost irritated at the fact that he'd been reminded of the terrible things his friend and brother had already went through at the hands of this man. "But this is no time for desperate, sloppy measures. Deidara can have the time of his life destroying the place after we are finished, but for now we need to think rationally and more importantly, stealthily."

Neji let out a growl of irritation and whirled back to the cliff-face, blinking his byakugan on and scanning the wall. There, directly in front of them, behind a good ten feet of solid metal disguised outwardly to look like nothing more than rock, was a tunnel entrance. "There." He pointed. "There's a seal on it. I don't see any sort of

buttons or keypads. No way to move it. It's probably tuned to specific chakras or moved with a jutsu."

He blinked at this out-loud thought as Itachi stepped up to the wall and placed a palm flat against it. "Orochimaru always uses a combination of science and jutsu in everything he does, as he is the only one who knows how to incorporate it and thusly, manipulate it."

Neji all but leaped up beside him. Science and Jutsu... eh? "Step back."

Itachi gave him a questioning look, but did as much. After which Neji closed his eyes and gathered his chakra. If he could manage to create a human magnet out of himself by shifting the electrical responses in his chakra flow, surely he could duplicate someone elses. He's seen that disgusting, inky shit inside kakuzu, Sasuke, and Shikamaru alike, he remembered it well enough. All he had to to was focus, and as Itachi said, not be too hasty or frantic.

He felt his life energy shifting inside of him, like a rubber band, recoiling back every time he tried to stretch and change it to something other than it was. He clenched his eyelids and grit his teeth, all he needed was a second. Chakra couldn't change permanently through anything but genetic altering, but temporarily, it was perfectly possible. In theory at least. It was the same as changing ones magnetic core, except one step higher, instead of the core, he had to change the entire surface to something completely different.

He could feel Itachi's presence boring into him at the side, knowing full well he was likely watching with his sharingan alight. This assesment was only proved true when he stepped up next to the struggling Hyuga and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Neji. You are a genius." He mumbled, and suddenly the pastel yellow of Itachi's chakra was flowing into him. Having unwanted chakra forced into you and borrowing someone's chakra, while seemingly the same principle, were completely different. Just blame it on this confusing magic known as jutsu. The body didn't tend to accept unwanted aid,

but when it was needed, or when the conscious command was given, it would.

And this is what he did.

Inexplicably, it made the process easier, having another chakra source to mimic for a moment before another attempt at morphing it to that disgusting black gunk. *Almost there...* He thought to himself, ignoring his body as it trembled, as his energy resisted and tried to spring back to its usual base.

"What the hell are they doing, hm?" Came from the background.

"I have no idea..."

Neji ignored it, dammit, it was right there, home stretch, one final push. He grit his teeth harder, forced his eyes open, greeted by the sight of nearly pitch black chakra swirling like a whirlwind around him, yet not a single strand of hair or tuft of clothing fluttered in the breeze that was practically burning his eyes. He let out an audible growl, giving one final heave of concentration and inner force, and there it went. The chakra turned to non-translucent black before him for no more than a flash. As he fell backward to his ass, panting heavily, a series of loud mechanical clanking came from behind the rockface.

He stared victoriously up at it as ever so slowly it retreated inward and then began sliding to the left, revealing the entrance.

"Holy fucking shit!" Deidara half-shouted directly behind him. "Itachi why the hell isn't *this* little fucker the one we're trying to get in the Akatsuki, hm? Did you see that fucking tornado? Was that Chakra? Is that what it looks like, hm?"

"Well done, Neji Hyuga." Itachi said with a faint smile, reaching out to help him up.

"And I can actually stand him. I'm so tired of having to deal with smug fucking arrogant assholes all the time. Let's incorporate him right now, yeah?"

"Sasori, please make it so that the door will remain open for our reinforcements." Itachi said, blatantly ignoring the gushing blonde.

"Not interested." Neji breathed out to his admirer as he was pulled back to his feet. If this was the kind of shit they did all day long, the kind of emotional trauma they had to repeatedly go through, he'd rather be bored to death back in his new little hometown waiting for Sasuke's return. He took an entire five seconds to attempt to slow his breathing and give the elder Uchiha next to him a quick glance before he darted off into the darkness, blinking on the byakugan as he went.

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"Okay Jashin... Now would be an awesome time to prove that nasty fucker wrong and help me out..." Shikamaru mumbled, eyes closed and head bowed. He could still taste his blood in his mouth, and had bitten deeply into his cheek until it, too, bled, just for good measure. His feet were secured to the legs of the chair, unfortunately, so he couldn't make a circle beneath him, but he had half the ritual down, surely that would count for something.

Jashin got his strength from belief. That actually made sense, and the Nara could remember Hidan mentioning something like that awhile ago too, in their apartment. *Unless you're a full-on disciple, and willing to accept him, he can't make you do shit.* So he gets his strength over those who believe in him... It made sense that Orochimaru had an army of Jashinists, seeing as those were the people who attacked Kakuzu, and a small group of them had attacked Shikamaru, himself. Of course they would ally with him, they probably wanted immortality just as much as any Jashinist. And to have all that belief severed, maybe it was affecting Jashin... Damn, this whole time he'd thought it all came from the souls he had to sacrifice, maybe that was just specifically related to he and Hidan's gift...

God this was all so confusing. He obviously needed to spend more time doing some research when he got out of here... *if* he could get out of here...

"Hidan and I still believe. Surely that's enough..." He mumbled out loud. "I need your fucking help here, and I promise, you can have that fucker's soul all to yourself..."

If you don't give yourself to him, he has no power. You didn't even have to give yourself to him to know he existed, that's the same as faith, isn't it? Even if one doesn't devote themselves fully... Damn, it kind of sucks that he'd had to kill everyone he'd gotten to show his power to, everyone that would undoubtedly believe after seeing the Nara do the things he did... OF course he was real, that Orochimaru bastard was blowing smoke out his ass. He was too fucking arrogant, and that would be his downfall.

He twisted in his seat again, pulling against the rope and handcuffs, snarling out a few curses when it still refused to free him. It was ridiculous to be so damned powerless right now, No one survived Jashin's will, isn't that what Hidan always said? It had to be true still, even if they were the only two left in the entire world still devoted to him, it had to be enough. DAMMIT, he had to get out of this fucking chair!

The door burst open, a few men came filing in before Orochimaru. Shikamaru ignored them as they filtered around behind them, glaring at the snake son of a bitch with all he had. His captor only gave him a sickly-sweet smile. "Are we having a religious dilemma yet?"

"No. It's not going to happen."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, little Jashinist. I need your devotion anyway, as it seems we have guests, and you're not all that powerful on your own, unfortunately."

Shikamaru glared for a second before his words sunk in. Guests? That must mean...

"Yes, a pitiful little four-man rescue team has come to save you. That useless puppeteer I used to be partnered with is among them. I'd like to be sure he receives a warm welcome, what better way to do that than to force them into battle with the very souls they're here to save?"

"You're a fucking idiot if you think I'd ever do that."

Orochimaru chuckled again, sauntering over to stand beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're an idiot if you think you have a choice, Shikamaru Nara. I realize I must have gone a bit overboard with the bodily manipulation before, as you seem to not recall aiding me in my capture and escape of Sasuke's body and Hidan's soul. I'll try to tone it back this time, I want you to remember the look in your dear friends eyes when you kill them for me."

The Nara's next words were choked off in his throat as that disgusting chakra flared up inside him, he'd forgotten about it temporarily, it had hid itself so well. It was back now, pouring into every crevice of his insides. He struggled against it, pushed as much as he could, the fleeting memory of fighting the same feeling flipping through him. Kakuzu's evil smile, those threads focusing themselves through his skins, into each key chakra junction in his body, pumping that disgusting stuff in there. Yes, he remembered now.

" *F..FUCK YOU!*" He snarled.

Kakuzu, he'd done all of this. That son of a bitch. Everyone had trusted him, even the younger immortal himself. He'd just started to think maybe the guy wasn't so bad after all. he'd betrayed the Akatsuki, but more importantly, he'd betrayed Hidan. *His* Hidan, probably back on that damned table now, screaming and thrashing, or laying in silence, staring at the ceiling, unable to even think straight with the drugs flowing through him.

*No.*



Neji, Neji was probably in that rescue party. Dammit. He would *not* kill, or even hurt Neji. That was the whole damn reason he was here right now, giving everything he had to save his ex repeatedly, giving his very fucking soul to save both Neji *and* Hidan. Now he was going to be pitted against them, used as a human weapon, even if he wasn't human anymore. That was the thing though, he *wasn't* human. Right? He was an immortal, a desciple of Jashin, unstoppable, a *god*.

Yes.

They wanted Kakuzu dead, those voices. Fine. He'd kill Kakuzu, and then he'd kill Orochimaru, and every other sorry fucker who got in their way.

Heat exploded in his chest, the slimey snake bastard took a few steps back, staring at him in interest. His eyes were open, his chest heaved. Anger, rage, pure, unrestrained wrath. YES! There it was! Oh fuck yes!

he roared in animalistic rage, distantly hearing the alarmed shouts of the men who'd come into the room. Someone placed their hand on his shoulder only to scream and yank it away. The black chakra inside him boiled and bubbled, his very skin felt like it was peeling off from the power, the blood red chakra enveloping him like a flame. His vision was starting to bleed away, he couldn't suck enough air in.

*I'll kill you. I'll kill all of you. Everyone.*

He flexed, snapping the ropes and handcuffs like twigs, and rose to his feet.

"Well this is interesting..." Orochimaru said, still studying him calmly. It only pissed him off more. *Scream, and run like the coward you are. You son of a bitch, you're going to die. I'm taking you to hell.*

"And i'd thought you'd exhausted your supply of surprises. Very interesting..." Orochimaru said again.

Shikamaru couldn't even think thoughts anymore. He pulled his leg back, coiling it like a spring, and with an audible effort released it. Too fast even for him to see, Orochimaru was gone, nothing but a hole in the wall directly behind where he'd been standing. Without Hesitation Shikamaru leaped through it, running down the corridor behind it blindly, wishing he could get himself to stop snarling the way he was. He wasn't in control anymore, he knew distantly in the back of his mind. Watching himself run with ridiculous speed, careening straight through the wall when he came to a dead end. Who needs doors anyway?

He tried as hard as he could to get the reins on the hulk he'd become, but his head felt weak, the mental exhaustion was catching up to him now that his body had all the power. *Hidan!* He tried to scream to himself. *Find Hidan!*

It was no use, he could only watch helplessly as he slaughtered person after person, each one he came across, killing them with weapons he procured out of thin air, each of them cloaked in that red fiery chakra, not even the slightest hint of his dark purple present. He used his bare hands on some of them, a quick grab around the throat, a slight squeeze, and their esophagus was broken, they crumbled to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

*Or Orochimaru, kill him before it fades away!*

Nothin, no response from his body, as if he were in a dream again, able only to watch everything happen, feeling just as numb and distant as he had in his nightmares he used to have. There were all kinds of emotions there, but all bunched together so heavily that it was as if he could even feel any of them.

The wall in front of him gave way just as easily as the others, tearing like aluminum as he leaped through it. His vision wavered for a moment, and suddenly he felt like he couldn't get enough oxygen into his body. It was too much, he realized, he was going to kill himself if he kept this up.

That thought lasted for all of ten seconds, until his body came to an abrupt stop, and he finally noticed why.

Kakuzu was standing in front of him, calm and stoic, just like always, regarding him with an unreadable expression. He heard himself roar at the man in fury, felt himself start to move, even his rational mind was thinking it now. *Kill him.*

He could, with all this power and rage. He could, and he would. That old bastard would die, or Shikamaru himself would. And he was still immortal, which left only one outcome.

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**A/N-**

**Oh! Hi! Short chapter again. BUT I'm doing it on purpose. So... yeah...**

**... I don't even know how long it's been... fuck. I'm so sorry I've kept everyone waiting. I've been in a really terrible state of mind for like, the last month, and before that I just couldn't seem to get my brain to think about anything except FYA. BUT, this story has lain Dormant long enough! And now it continues! Because the ideas and inspiration are flooding in!**

**Hopefully, it's not shit, I've had to go back and read through to remember what i was doing again. Heh. Scatterbrain... damn. But Now that i have recalled, the show will be going on. I'm taking a hiatus from FYA, since it's almost done anyway and lots of people including me are upset about that. So I will be focusing on this loveley little number that i started literally like a year ago and still haven't fucking finished. Imao.**

**Anyway. Yes. I'm back. The story continues. I love you guys, forgive the typos, and don't forgeeeet to reviewww!**

# The Greater Good, The Greater Evil

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## Come What May

"You've got a lot of nerve standing there trying to stop me, old man." Shikamaru growled, surprising himself with the demonic tremor in his voice.

"What makes you think *I'm* trying to stop *you*." He replied in that annoyingly deep tone.

"Shut up, traitor. I'm going to kill you, once and for all." He launched forward, not giving Kakuzu any time to respond. He didn't care what he had to say, actions spoke louder than words, right? A flaming scythe appeared in his right hand, and a second later he swung, having already reached the bastard despite the hundred some feet that had been between them. But Kakuzu only jumped up, using the weapon as a stepping stone to flip over Shikamaru's head and land behind him. The jashinist whirled and was rewarded with a black fist slamming into his face. He started to fly backward before something wrapped around his ankle, catching him and yanking him back the way he came, slamming him into the ground. The metal floor gave way just as easily as the walls, ripping like paper, and Shikamaru plummeted down to the level below.

Snarling in even further rage, something he hadn't thought possible, he pushed back to his feet and leaped back up to go destroy the treacherous bastard.

"I'm assuming you're not currently in your right mind." Kakuzu said from below him just before his ankle was gripped again and he was slammed down again through the multiple floors, tearing through them like paper. He clenched his teeth, laying on his back in the small crater he was in, waiting the few heartbeats it would take for

his spine to un-shatter itself and the multiple broken ribs and spiderwebbed cracks in his skull to do the same.

"Seeing as you're fighting like Hidan. Attack first, strategy later. All emotion and no brain."

"I don't need a fucking strategy to kick your ass." He snarled again, whipping his own fiery chakra extension out and grabbing Kakuzu by the middle. He yanked him roughly into him, coiling his legs until the elder man was just over him and then releasing, shoving the stitched-up ragdoll into his own little crevice in the ceiling.

Without pause he jumped to his feet and shoved his flattened hand through the man's chest five times in all the places where his hearts should be, clinging to the ceiling as if he were Spiderman and smiling like a lunatic until the body poofed away, leaving nothing but a human-shaped indentation.

He was greeted instead with the sight of a coffee-skinned hand bursting through his own ribcage. It missed his heart though, as he managed to release himself from the metal at the last moment, sending the pair of them bursting through yet another level after he slammed all of his weight onto his opponent. He grabbed the hand still shoved through him at the wrist and forced chakra into the body, enough to send all five goddamn hearts into failure, but again the hand poofed away and his back hit the floor below him.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" He raged, flipping back up to his feet and twisting just in time to catch a blackened fist in his own hand. He swung with his other one, but Kakuzu mirrored his action, catching the attack, and they stood there for all of two heartbeats before the tanned skin of the elder man began to sizzle and he released the Nara to leap backward.

Shikamaru glared and ground his teeth, the sheer force of the chakra radiating through him was burning not only him, but everything around him. He desperately sucked in air, cursing loudly. He couldn't

take much more of this. Fuck. He couldn't do it, he didn't have the time to kill everyone and rescue Hidan.

"Are you going to kill me or not, boy?" Kakuzu said, standing idly some feet away, studying the flaming jashinist in stoic silence.

"Eventually..." Shikamaru wheezed back. The anger was fading as it made way for the involuntary panic sweeping through him. His lungs couldn't seem to get enough oxygen, not when he was surrounded by flaming chakra. It burned it all away before he could even breathe it in.

"You need to do it now."

He blinked, staring incredulously at the bastard.

"If you don't do it right now while you have the power then you will die. You've underestimated your opponent."

"I didn't know you were a fucking traitor." He snarled, the evil tremor was fading, he could feel the power leaking out of him slowly. His lungs burned, pleading for air, his vision wavered again. He stumbled despite standing still in one place.

"Now you've waited too long. I should have known you wouldn't have the spine. You and Hidan never listen to me, How many times have I told you to be careful or risk death."

"Shut up... I have.. to get out of here..."

"I will stop you... I don't have a choice."

*He's so weak, considering his age and experience.* Shikamaru glared at him. You're damn right he was weak, did he even try to fight it?

"Where's Hidan!?"

"I don't know."

"BULLSHIT! I don't give a fuck if you want to kill me, but help me get him out of here! You can tell me, even if you can't show me, he's letting you talk now isn't he?"

"He's monitoring us very closely. I don't think you understand the gravity of what's happening around us, boy."

Shikamaru scoffed, swaying in place and then stumbling as he pulled breath after breath into his body, each raspier than the last. *Shit, shit, shit.* He was going to have to run away to find Hidan. Something caught in his throat when he tried to reply, a cough seized him and with it came blood spurting out his mouth.

"One of us is going to die tonight." Kakuzu said again lowly, eyeing the spatter on the floor.

Shikamaru doubled over, hands on his knees, vision clouding as if a film of smoke were being pumped into the room, this power was going to kill him if he didn't let it go. But shit, now he was three times as lost as he'd been originally, and far deeper into this weird little maze of a hideout.

Footsteps, slowly coming closer. The Jashinist grit his teeth and forced himself to straighten up, and drop back into a defensive position. It didn't stop his opponent, who merely came to stand in front of him, so close that his clothing began to singe from the consistently weakening fire surrounding Shikamaru. He stared up at him, trapped there in that stance, unable to draw in breath, unable to let go of his tight hold on the power, the still lingering rage that swarmed beneath his skin for this man who'd been the cause of all of this. The one who'd ruined everything.

He was right, if something wasn't done soon, if he didn't swallow his pride and make an escape and take a moment to collect himself, he would die right here and now. But who was to say he wouldn't be ambushed and captured again if he let down his guard? Kakuzu was like a walking, talking, fighting security camera. And with that kick

Shikamaru had delivered to Orochimaru's gut a few moments ago, he was not likely to be in a very good mood.

Shikamaru's body seemed to make the decision for him. His knees buckled under him and suddenly he was kneeling on the ground, the room spinning around him. He managed to hold himself up with one arm braced against the cool metal. He stared at Kakuzu's feet, eyes wide as saucers, sounding like a weed-whacker that refused to start up as he sucked in each miniscule amount of air he could manage.

"And you still owe me a favor, boy." Kakuzu said, towering there over him, calm as anything, as if the battle were already won.

The world went black for a second. Shikamaru shook his head, grunting with the effort and then hacking up more blood, and managed to refocus for all of ten seconds. In which time he used to look up into those damned christmas eyes, calmly waiting for him to turn into a helpless mass of flesh.

This couldn't be happening. It wasn't fair. He'd come so far, Jashin had finally answered, he was going to free Hidan and save the day again, despite slowly losing his mind, despite the overwhelming odds against him.

Suddenly cool air wafted in around him, the power leaked from his body, leaving him feeling as if he were soaking wet and carrying a rhinoceros on his back. He almost slumped to the ground when he was caught. Hands around his throat, the world blurred dangerously again, and he was lifted into the air by the strong grip blocking the abundant air he was too weak to struggle any more to inhale.

"I believe I'd like to cash it in now." Kakuzu said, giving him a demonic sneer just before the world went black once more... and stayed that way.

*Fuck.*

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"Neji!" Itachi snapped, drawing back his arm after shoving a kunai through a man's eyesocket, perching on his shoulders like a monkey.

The brunette's eyes flicked to him for a millisecond before he dropped to the ground more out of instinct than anything. Itachi flicked his forearm forward, There was a gargled cry behind Neji, and then a loud thunk as a body collapsed onto the floor beside him.

Itachi flipped off the shoulders of the man he'd just killed as it, too, fell down, lifeless, and in one smooth movement retrieved his weapons, shoved them back in their holsters after wiping them momentarily onto his clothing, and continued calmly on his way.

Neji rose to his feet and followed him, still doing his best not to seem phased by the nonchalant murdering happening around him. It had to be done, these were very, very bad people with a leader so clever that he outsmarted Itachi fucking Uchiha. Jail would never hold them, they simply had to die.

At least that's what he kept telling himself.

He moved along silently behind the elder brother, emotions more or less completely numb in all the insanity going on around him. He wasn't even going to put any effort into freaking out, that could be saved for later, after Sasuke and Shikamaru and (sigh) even the psycho were safe and Orochimaru and every single one of his lackies were dead. Itachi had stated in no uncertain terms that everyone and everything related of their own free will to the man must be destroyed, lest he find some way to come back from the dead again.

It made sense, Somehow, everything they were doing right now made sense, even though every last bit of it was completely insane. He found himself thinking idle thoughts best left unthought as he followed the Uchiha wordlessly through the crippling maze of corridors and narrow, claustrophobic hallways. They seemed to center around his ex, more specifically, seeing Shikamaru standing there fighting against what had to be crippling pain as that chakra

was forced into him. Then obeying like some sort of brainwashed zombie, orders to shove a stake through the throat of his boyfriend, currently possessed by *Shikamaru's* lover. And now being held prisoner, possibly having all sorts of terrible things done to him, things like Hidan had described in Sasuke's voice in the hideout.

He wondered for a second how Shikamaru could keep lusting after that man, given all that he's been put through. he wondered why he, himself, had even let himself be dragged into this fucked up situation. Then pushed the thought just as quickly out of his head.

It didn't matter, none of it mattered. They were in far too deep to back out now, all that mattered was stopping this convoluted scheme, and quite literally saving the world as they knew it.

"Neji..." Itachi's soft voice snapped him back fully into reality, and his pale eyes flicked up to him, questioning. When he realized the raven hair wasn't looking, he forced his voice to work.

"What?"

"Do you recall what I told you while we were on our way to meet the others...?"

Neji blinked, yes, he remembered the conversation very clearly, as if his mind was eager to have any sort of distraction from the moment.

"Yes..." He said back cautiously.

"Now that we are alone again... I think it's time to explain to you what I couldn't before..." The Uchiha muttered. Sasori and Deidara had stayed back at the entrance to await the reinforcements, leaving he and Itachi to take on the overwhelming dangers of this dungeon alone until help arrived.

Neji remained silent, not sure he could handle any more twisted details of the situation, but unable to voice this aloud. Really, how much more fucked up could this tale even get?

Itachi cleared his throat, motioning for the Hyuga to come walk beside him instead of slightly behind where he was. When the brunette was positioned how he wanted, Itachi slowed his pace just a fraction and took a deep breath.

"I... no longer know what the correct action to take it, Neji Hyuga." He said slowly, as if considering each word before speaking it aloud. "As I said, when I fail, I have a habit of doing it in ways that ensure I can never repair the damage I have done. And at this point, I'm hesitant to do anything at all... I need your help, Neji... And that is why I'm going to tell you this."

A brief silence passed between them, Neji did his best to appear busy scanning the area within a certain radius around them for enemies or traps or anything of that matter with the Byakugan, resisting the urge to just turn tail and flee from whatever dark, terrible secrets Itachi was about to share with him. He honestly didn't know how much more he could handle. He hadn't had but a few months to train himself to resist his cowardice, after all. It was like an animal in a cage, struggling to be free deep down inside him...

"I don't know of any way to explain this delicately... so I'm just going to say it. " He stopped in his tracks then, making Neji repeat the action and turn stiffly to him. Byakugan and Sharingan met, and Itachi took another deep breath, holding it for a moment.

"Jashin is an Uchiha."

Neji blinked, Thoughts no longer even processing.

"He's not a living person, persay. But he's not just some figment of Hidan or Shikamaru's imagination either... He once questioned me on my in-depth knowledge of Hidan's religion, Shikamaru did. I explained to him that I would tell him later, I was never able to keep that promise, thankfully. But it seems now that that truth may be the only thing that can stop Orochimaru from getting what he wants."

He paused for a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts. Neji was still completely lost in such rampant confusion that he couldn't even seem to get his brain to function enough to breathe correctly, able only to draw in very short puffs of air.

"After I met Hidan, after he mistook me for his god, and after discovering that the Sharingan had no effect on him... After all of that, he let me live, to this day I'm not quite certain why, perhaps it was some plan of that god of his. He was preparing for this very moment, maybe... Either way, I found myself further researching not only the religion, but my own ancestors as well. There was some connection between them, there had to be, as I'd never met another soul the Sharingan wouldn't work against, Not even you Hyuga's were safe from it if it was used correctly against you. My research led me to the tomb of one of our most powerful ancestors, hundreds and hundreds of years old. And in there was a scroll..."

He paused again to swallow hard, considering something, before starting off at a slow walk again. Neji managed to turn and keep pace with him based solely on some sort of autopilot that kicked into gear.

"I told you they dabbled in black magic, forces that sleep on in this world that should never been seen by the human eye, should never be tampered with. That was how jutsu had come about, but before jutsu there was an even more raw form of power... My family... hundreds of years ago, Even before Hidan's time... used that power to create Jashin."

Neji choked. Itachi only continued.

"He could best be described as a living genjutsu. He was created originally as a way for the Uchihas to mass an army of unkillable soldiers, loyal only to their god whom they did not realize was nothing more than a puppet. But something such as that cannot be controlled... Jashin became self-aware... And because he was created by the Sharingan wielders, he made himself, and every one

of his followers impervious to it, so that they could never be slave to the Uchiha's again.

Just as one has to be aware of their own ability to jutsu, one has to be aware of Jashin to receive any of his power or blessings. Like Shikamaru, like you, and that scar on your chest, one simply has to believe, and give themselves to that belief. And that is where he gets his power. Your blood is infused with the signature of your DNA, That recipe includes that of your chakra. When a Jashinist gives his or her blood in an offering, they are offering unlimited stores of chakra to him. This is also how he gives Shikamaru his unexplainable power. This is how the god can occasionally slip in and manipulate he and Hidan's body. Jashin is not actually a god, he's nothing more than a man-made, concious Jutsu."

"... So... He's real... but he's not real... Is what you're saying."

"Essentially, yes..." Itachi stated calmly, officially blowing Neji's brain right out the back of his head. Metaphorically of course, but still. "A power like that... There's simply no way to destroy it. Luckily enough the God Christ was a religion sweeping the developing world. Many people chose instead the power of a real god with evidence in their eyes that cemented him into reality, instead of just some fleeting God of chaos and destruction only ever heard of by word of mouth via a Jashinist. Over the centuries, his popularity dwindled, his power decreased. And there was but one immortal left undestroyed by my family..."

"... The psycho..."

"Yes. However. He was... a special case. Jashin to him is still an omnipotent being, He is something more than what he really is. Hidan never learned of the true origins of his deity, and thus never suffered that chink in his armor that would allow him to lose the gift and become mortal again. He is not even fully aware of who he is, Neji Hyuga... I've wondered, for as long as I've known him, what would come of him learning all this. Half of me thinks he would simply just dismiss it and carry on as he has forever. But the other half of me

knows that he is not merely a scatter-brained idiot as he tried to make himself believe. When I met Hidan, he expressed wanting to die, and being unable to... And I think he would... If he knew that he could. I think he would need nothing more than just the knowledge of everything he knew and believed in being a complete and total farce, and he would crack right there and then and he would just die."

Taking a very deep breath, and letting it out slowly, Neji ignored the pure chaos in his brain and tried to sort out the rational thoughts regarding the subject instead of the frantic screaming informing him that he would also be losing his sanity after all this was over. "And... Jashin... that's why you killed off your family. Wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"But... Itachi... would Hidan's death really be such a terrible thing? You'd.. youd sacrificed people you loved, people who had a right to be alive now, even those who had no idea of all this just to save him?"

"No, absolutly not." Itachi snapped, finally seeming to take some sort of offense. Neji recoiled at this, but forced himself not to turn into a blubbering mess the last time he'd thought he'd humiliated the man. There was nowhere to retreat to now, after all. They were both in this together.

"After I met Hidan, I met with the elders of our clan. I felt that sharing this knowledge with them, being in the advanced time we were in now, with all the new jutsu's poppin gup, that there we could discover some way to put an end to Jashin. It was quite the opposite, Neji. Hidan had still killed someone that I loved very dearly, for some reason I don't think even he understands. Simply because this God of his told him to. I'm not saying that the blame does not rest on Hidan, but it does not rest there solely. The only way to rid the world of Hidan, the very last immortal, was to rid the world of Jashin."

"But Hidan died! Shikamaru told me he died after you two chopped him to pieces and buried him!"

"But Hidan is not a lone soldier. Each and every time he was defeated, someone was there to dig him out and bring him back. He never truly died, Neji. His body was only in a state much like a coma. With nothing more than a drop of blood and a sacrifice, he was alive again. Kakuzu has been his partner in more ways than one for a century, but even before that one has to imagine he was outsmarted and disposed of in the same manner. And yet he still lives. As long as there are people for Jashin to manipulate, Hidan will never truly die. As long as Jashin exists, Hidan will never find peace."

"But..." He stuttered. "But that doesn't... That's not even fair. How can someone like that even exist? I get that Jashin can use your own chakra against you but how can he keep someone alive when they're supposed to die?"

"Chakra is the life-essence of the body, is it not?"

"Well yes.. but still-"

"The sacrifices that Hidan performs comes into that equation. As the only immortal, he's the only Jashinist capable of performing the actual ritual. I can only deduce that the souls he gives to Jashin serve as replacements. It's very similar to the Jutsu Kakuzu uses, in fact I believe that where he may have gotten the idea. He has one original heart, when it dies, the spares are used, transferring their life back into the original one. "

"So every time his body suffers a fatal blow, That fucking cult god just slips an extra soul into his body. Like jump-starting a goddamned car..." Neji murmured, eyes wide.

"Something like that. Souls of course can not be injured like a body, but perhaps the essence of them can be turned into some sort of power used to regenerate the vessel in which the soul rests. Jashin is quite literally the most powerful weapon on Earth, able to perform feats as such... And *that* Neji... is why my family had to perish..."

"... They didn't want to destroy it. They wanted to use it..." He whispered, just before movement some 20 yards in front of him caught his eye. More peons, 5... no... 6 of them, rushing this way. Itachi seemed to see them at the same time, and tensed visibly, readying to the attack. The both of them duplicated themselves into clones just as the first attack, a giant funnel of fire, blasted out of the darkness before them.

Two Itachi's stepped in front of the Nejis and the fire was absorbed into some sort of black hole that appeared in front of the Uchiha. The same technique he's seen Sasuke use. And the Fire was gone.

With a glance, the two looked at each other, and Neji suddenly understood just exactly how heavy the burden Itachi had carried around for all these years was. He understood just why he kept himself so close to Hidan. So he could be constantly reminded of why he'd done the things he done, as well as keep an eye on him. Why he babysat the man like some motherless child. He understood why he clung so tightly to Sasuke, not only as his last remaining family, not only as his sole reason for continuing to live, but for the fact that at any moment Sasuke could succumb to the genes inside him and suddenly crave world domination. And... And so much more. So many more answers he'd just received, he couldn't even *begin* to understand all of them.

And for the very first time in his life, he suddenly understood that Hidan was not the villain in all of this.

And with that giant realization all occurring in the timespan of a mere glance, his resolve hardened. If Itachi could live with all of this, and still keep fighting on... He could to. He could be a hero. Just Like Shikamaru. Just like Itachi. He could be strong, and he could do what needed to be done, even if it meant eternal damnation... He could be so selfless that the ignorant could never see it as anything but insanity.

And he would help everyone. Just like Shikamaru. Just like Itachi. At any cost, even his own life.



Because there really was no logic left in this world anymore. All it ever was is a matter of perception. What a person sees as the greater good, protecting it with all they had, and sometimes even more. Becoming a lesser monster in order to combat the larger one.

Together, the Hyuga and the Uchiha raced on to save the world, slaughtering even the innocent in order to do so.

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A/N-

Jeez. I'm going to just stop making promises. I can't ever seem to keep them.

I know I know... You waited for-fucking-ever just to get another chapter tha's not even all that long. I won't make excuses. But I will assure you I haven't abandoned this story. I still plan on finishing it.

It's just so damn hard. So much crap is going on, I feel just as insane as the characters trying to keep all these ideas and stuff straight in my head. Lol.

Anyway, there are probably no words to describe the extreme amount of typos and whatnot in this chapter. Please, please forgive me, I promise, in due time, they will be fixed. But for now, you just have to accept what I can give.

I love you guys for still reading. Please please please leave your reviews. I desperatley need them.

See ya next chapter.

# A rock and a hard place

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## Come What May

It wasn't fair, really. Nothing that was happening, or had happened since Hidan turned and walked away from him that day had been fair. And maybe even before then too. Since 6 months ago... nope, even just a few days before that...

*This was not the plan...*

Or shit, maybe hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Since then, it hadn't been fair. Since he'd given his goddamn soul to save the person he loved, for that very first time... It wasn't fair. Everytime he won, life just erased the board and started over. Best two out of three, three out of five, five out of seven, And so on and so on and so on...

*This is not how it's supposed to be...*

Struggling, always struggling. The days passed and years went by and he somehow managed to stay alive, despite the fact that he couldn't die. But this... this was wrong, this was not supposed to happen.

"They will not kill me if they think I can be saved." Kakuzu's deep voice said, muffled as though he were trying to listen with water in his ears. It faded in and out as he stood there dutifully beside the elder man, unable to command his own body. Concious but not aware, with his mind stuck in some other universe that just happened to overlap with the one he was supposed to be in. There, but not.

"I have no intention of walking out of here alive..." Kakuzu continued. Shikamaru stared at him, unable to think clearly enough through the

inky black glue clogging up his brain. "I served my wretched time on this earth, I did my duty as a guardian for as long as it took. I tried to take more time that I wasn't allotted, and here I am, in another mortal man's control. A dog of war, a pawn, once again."

"Are you talking to me?" Shikamaru said, or tried to say, except his mouth refused to obey. Unable to grasp this clearly, he continued sending out signals to his body to move of his own will, it stubbornly stayed put, standing there like a soldier, obedient, silent.

"He's going to face us off against the Akatsuki, and that Hyuga brat. I don't know who will emerge victorious. So this is my favor; if I'm not dead by the end of the battle, you will kill me. "

For a second, for just one tiny, unnoticeable second, he felt his own eyes widen through the shock and horror that zapped through him after these waterlogged words finally sunk into his half-asleep brain.

*Kill him. I will kill him.*

The words rang over and over in the empty darkness he was surrounded by, bouncing off the walls almost like a tangible object he had to duck and dodge to avoid being pummeled. For a moment he was confused, but that ringing kept on, and it was then that he realized what was going on. Orochimaru had him again, he was no longer in control of himself, able only to sit back and watch himself do the man's bidding.

Kakuzu stared at him for a little while longer, then nodded ever so slightly. "I have no place left in this world anyway..."

---

Like words on a chalkboard, again and again. He tried to flinch away, tried to run, tried to cover his ears, but in this blank nothingness, some recess of his mind, there was nowhere to go, nothing to do.

'He's going to make me do it...' He tried thinking to himself, to drown out the promise screeching at him in the background. 'I can't say no

like this... I'll follow any orders given to me...'

Why this suddenly was so alarming, he didn't know. He'd just promised to kill Kakuzu not but ten minutes ago, before he'd collapsed, briefly dead due to lack of oxygen. Part of him didn't mind this promise he'd been forced to make against his will, it was just the fact that it wouldn't shut the bloody fucking hell up!

But the other part, the small humanity in him that still remained intact was questioning. It noticed the apprehension to this command, and was digging deeper. 'He wants me to kill him. He's so set on it that he's making sure not to give me a choice in the matter...' But why. Why would he want to die? Why would proud, greedy Kakuzu request death? But even further than that, what was he talking about? His duty as a guardian? More time than allotted?

Always secrets, always with these cryptic words he could never seem to decode until it was too late.

"My pride was always my downfall..." The big man muttered again. "I never thought it would be Hidan's too."

*This was not a part of the plan...*

---

"They're here... I think..."

Itachi hesitated for a moment in examining a very thick and artistically carved stone door to flick his eyes over to the brunette. "Good, I believe we may be getting close." He returned his studying, sharingan blazing. "There's something of significance behind this door Neji Hyuga. The door itself and the fact that theres some sort of barrier just inside it is far too suspicious. I can't seem to find any way to open it."

"We can wait for your friend then, he'll just blow it open..." Neji replied wearily, unable to do anymore internal freaking out after all he had learned. He was determined still, yes, but with every moment

that passed and they couldn't seem to find any familiar faces, his confidence waned. Itachi's short breakdown before they'd come here was starting to seem more and more true, his own actions seeming more and more ludicrous. The odds they faced were overwhelming, there was no possible way to win this, not without doing irreversible damage to very mentally unstable and extremely powerful and important people.

"Absolutely not." Itachi said, looking at the Hyuga as if he'd just suggested they give up the search and instead go have an end of the world party. "An explosion this deep within a network of tunnels such as this, they would collapse in on themselves and kill us all."

"So maybe He just shouldn't have come at all then? I mean that's all he does, isn't it? Blow stuff up?" His voice was flat as he replied, unable to make any sort of emotional response. Where did emotion even enter into this anymore? He's already witnessed and assisted in the murders of several, several people. Ideals and vague sense of morality were completely useless and frankly seemed juvenile at this point. When saving the world, one's own feelings didn't factor into the equation.

"We need all the help we can get..." The elder Uchiha moved away from the door to stand next to the brunette, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. "Neji. I understand what you're going through. Believe me, I do. But you're far too smart to think that there's any way out of the situation now. Even if you left and washed your hands of it, even if we succeeded without you, it would always linger on your mind, and the weight of that is more than any man can bear alone."

"You did it." Neji said, not exactly sure what underlying message was encased in the short phrase.

"... There's a hundred to none possibility, Neji, that You and I, Shikamaru and Hidan, Sasuke, Kakuzu, and all of the Akatsuki, will die here tonight if we do not manage to stop Orochimaru. Take solace in the fact that if we fail, you will not have to live with the consequences."

Neji let his eyes meet the blazing crimson of Itachi's, disbelieving. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I don't believe telling anyone they might die soon would help any sort of situation Neji... But given what we're dealing with..."

" *Given what we're dealing with,* " Neji snapped, suddenly angry now. It almost sounded as if Itachi was accepting their failure already.

"Even if we *do* miraculously manage to defeat this assholes whole fucking army *and* our friends, theres still a chance we all might fucking die!" His voice raised as he spoke. This wasn't what he needed to hear, there was nothing anyone could say at this point to comfort him. And trying to consol him with *that* load of shit? 'Well, at least we'll be dead...' That the hell was Itachi even *thinking*!?

"Even if we don't all die, what are the chances of all of us making it out of this? Huh? Tell me oh great Uchiha! Exactly how many of your and my friends and loved ones will we have to choose to live or die tonight? "

"Don't you dare insult me with that!" Itachi snarled, jolting Neji so badly that he stumbled backward and nearly fell to the ground. The usually calm and collected Itachi Uchiha was now glaring at him, fists clenched with the faint glow of chakra flames glowing around it. "You know *nothing* of sacrifice." He hissed, before his eyes flicked up to glare into the darkness behind Neji. The two remained in that position for an everlasting moment, Neji actually slightly afraid for his life, and humiliated beyond all reason, Itachi only staring into the black hallway behind him.

Finally their eyes met again, The older of the two visibly relaxed, but his expression did not change. "Given what we're dealing with, Neji Hyuga... In all honesty, I hope I *am* dead before the situation comes to that. I've no shoulder-room left to carry any further burdens... Nagato's doppelganger, Pein, has locked onto our location, they're be here momentarily. " He added at the end, turning with a whirl of his cloak to return to studying the door.

"I'm sorry." Neji sputtered out, rewarding him with a hard glance from the Uchiha.

"I never claimed to be a hero..." Itachi said quietly, just above a whisper. "Come what may... I never did."

---

*Hidan!*

There he was. Standing there on the other side of this gigantic, stadium-sized room, eyes glazed and dark, as if he were nothing more than a husk. Lines of stitches ran back and forth across his exposed upper body like railroads on a map. Shikamaru recoiled inside his thoughts, then forced himself to be comforted by the knowledge that Hidan had been hacked to pieces before and recovered just fine. But the memory of Sasuke, inhabited apparently by Hidan's spirit, speaking of the terrible things done to him, the look in his eyes, the fury in his voice, the tremble of his hands... Well, there wasn't much comfort to be had.

Especially not with Sasuke standing right there next to him, in the same sort of unconscious but aware condition. He wondered idly if that was how he looked, an empty shell of a person, a catatonic zombie, alive but not. Able only to watch through his own eyes as his body moved of its own will, refusing to heed his commands, ignoring his wishes, no matter how badly he wanted to go grab the albino idiot and hold on and never let him go again.

*I will kill him.*

A zap of panic went through him. Oh no, Orochimaru was going to put them all on a team together to try and kill the Akatsuki, and Neji too. Which meant, if they didn't kill Kakuzu, Shikamaru was going to have to do it, and Hidan would see it. Hidan was going to have to watch as one of the only people in the world that he loved, brutally slaughtered the other...

His body continued moving forward, marching dutifully beside Kakuzu's silent, looming form. Why? Why why *WHY!*? Why was this happening, why did Kakuzu want him to kill him, why wasn't he given a choice in the matter? Why Did Hidan have to witness it? Why did he have to be here? Why!? Why was this happening to him!? Why Jashin!? Please... just *tell me why...*

He started thrashing then, aware suddenly of his own screaming, trapped there inside his own head. Unable to look away, unable to do anything at all except scream and flail and curse to heaven and hell and any other existing dimension related to any sort of religion. This was not happening, is simply couldn't. He'd just finally lost his mind. It had to have happened, way back when they'd just reached the warehouse, when Kakuzu had consoled him, it must of been then. Everything after was just a figment of his imagination.

Or maybe in his reunion with Hidan. Maybe the idiot had accidentally killed him and now he was serving his time in hell. Maybe even before that. Maybe everything after those years ago, maybe Hidan had killed him down in that basement. Maybe seeing Neji in the state he was in had driven him insane, perhaps he was wrapped up tight in a straightjacket in an insane asylum right now, and all of this was nothing more than a delusion...

It was the only thing that made sense. It was the only thing that calmed the unfiltered insanity he felt creeping up on him as he screamed and tried with everything that he had to escape this prison in his own mind.

*Jashin... Jashin please...* Why the hell was he still praying to that idiot God? As if he'd be of any use, he hadn't done a damn thing before, the twisted, sadistic bastard. He'd wanted to escape that interrogation room, and yes, Jashin had helped him out, then led him directly back into a situation that was by far a thousand times worse.

"HIDAN!" He screamed, again and again, unable to unlock his eyes from the dormant, stitched form in front of him. "I don't know what to



do!" He cried, if he could even form tears. "I... I don't know what to do... tell me what to do..."

If he could have collapsed to his hands and knees, if he could have had at least that much freedom, he would have. If he could somehow look into those violet, empty eyes, and convey some sort of message, if he could make any expression at all... *I'd rather die...* He thought to himself. *I'd rather die and let Kakuzu have him than do this.* Could he do that? What if... what if he just stopped? What if offered his immortality back? What if he could make another deal with Jashin? What if he could just cancel it? He wouldn't be anything then, the Akatsuki could slay him with one blow and he wouldn't have to witness any more of this chaos, this terrible terrible nightmare.

"Hello again, Shikamaru!"

His attention snapped back to reality, suddenly seeing none other than the bastard behind all of this standing face to face with him, smiling as if this were just some dinner party. *If I could kick him again...* Shikamaru thought to himself.

"No. I'd rather you didn't do that. You've got punishment coming your way for that after this is all over. That really hurt, you know."

*He... he can hear me? He can hear me inside my head...*

"Yes. Of course I can. What fun would it be to manipulate another person's body if I couldn't hear their screams of agony? Really Mister Nara... For a genius... you're such a let down." Orochimaru said, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder. He then turned and sauntered down the line of his soldier husks, giving them each that sickly sweet smile, before he turned and came to stand back in front of Kakuzu.

He simply stared for a few heartbeats, as if looking or waiting for something. Finally his expression changed to one of meager disgust. "If you think I'll mistake your silence for obedience, you're an idiot."

Whatever you're planning, *Guardian*, It won't work." He whirled around at this, addressing the four of them as a whole. "I can at least compliment your stubbornness. You lot really just can't accept that you've been outwitted. One your friends are dead, and I've figured out whatever piece of this puzzle that I'm missing, You'll all be dying anyway."

Shikamaru stared at the Hidan across from him, suddenly recalling what Orochimaru had said to him earlier. Hadn't Hidan resisted to bodily control? What was happening now? Why was he here? Had he finally crumbled? Or... or even worse, what if his soul had not been replaced into his body?

And Sasuke, standing there beside him. Had he at least re-entered his body before all this? FUCK! If he could only speak!

"No. That would be far too troublesome, as you like to say, Shikamaru Nara." Orochimaru snapped, coming to stand uncomfortably close in front of him again. He gave him a smirk and a light pat on the cheek before whirling again. "Anyway, Your friends will be bursting in here any second now. That irritating brother of yours seems to think calling in reinforcements will make some sort of difference, Sasuke Dear." He paused to let out a dark chuckle. "I don't know why they're even still trying. He'd never be able to murder his beloved younger brother in cold blood. And it's not as if I'd just let you go, after all the trouble you damn Uchiha's have caused me."

*I will kill him...* The promise echoed again in Shikamaru's mind. Orochimaru turned slightly toward him, staring suspiciously, but seemed to ignore it before starting over toward a hidden door that slid open on the west wall. "Kill them all or die trying." He said, with a wave of dismissal, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He paused just before leaving, and twisted around, clapping his hands together as if he'd forgotten something. "You might want to take that very seriously. I can assure you that if any of them escape death by your hand, they will suffer it by mine, and it will not be as quick and painless if you'd done it."

With that he turned and disappeared down the corridor, and the hidden door slid back into place behind him, camouflaged perfectly as nothing more than a wall.

Seething, the Nara struggled again to have any sort of control over himself. Even if he could so much as blink he'd be making progress. This couldn't be all there was, it just couldn't. It didn't make sense, this wasn't how it could end.

*Jashin has a plan for you...* Hidan had used to say. Was it all coming to fruition now? Was this part of it? Was he supposed to help destroy Orochimaru? That didn't make sense though, the slaughter god had no vendetta against that man. In fact, if he really considered it, Orochimaru was doing nothing more than trying to become a Jashinist...

No, because he didn't want to devote himself. He was trying to obtain the immortality without having to convert. *Blasphemy*. Right. Jashin wouldn't stand for that... That had to be what it was...

But if that was so, why hadn't he just been able to kill him earlier? Why had he just kicked him away and ran? *Because of Hidan*- Yes but no... If Jashin wanted only Orochimaru dead, he would have just had him killed at the first chance... there was more to this... He was still missing something, something very important...

He was ripped from his thoughts then as his body suddenly moved, diving forward and rolling into a somersault back to his feet. Shouting at the sudden movement inside his head, he watched as his body spun and caught the blackened fist of Kakuzu in his hand, crouching and yanking the elder man, using his own momentum against him to flip him over his body and throw him.

He collided with the wall heavily, shaking the room and sending a sprinkle of dust down from various cracks in the high ceiling.

Still watching in disbelief, Shikamaru wished he had the ability to speak, if only to ask him 'What the fuck!?' So... Kakuzu was

attacking him, he suddenly had his own will again? and his body was dodging and countering just out of... what? Instinct? Or was Orochimaru seeing this, controlling him?

*"Whatever you're planning, Guardian, it won't work."*

*I will kill him.*

Kakuzu was charging back at him already, and he did his best to detach himself from what was happening. He had to figure this out, the old man was trying to do something, trying to send some message. Orochimaru thought he was planning something, Kakuzu had ordered Shikamaru to kill him. But how was that any sort of plan? And why the hell did that bastard call Kakuzu 'guardian' as if he were taunting him?

Fuck! What the fuck is happening here!?

He dodged another blow from the man, who seemed to just be sticking with a normal bodily fighting style instead of using any sort of jutsu, except for hardening his skin the way he was. That had to mean something, if he suddenly had broken of orochimarus control, and he were trying to get Shikamaru to kill him, shouldn't he come at him harder? He may have given the orders, but Orochimaru's ruled over Kakuzu's, and he'd instructed them to kill the others. Shikamaru's body wouldn't kill him unless he was actually defending his life to do it... How he knew that, he wasn't exactly sure. Side effects of being trapped in your own mind, he supposed...

He narrowly avoided a leg sweep, flipping back on his shoulders and hands and doing what he could only think of as a reverse donkey-kick straight into Kakuzu's gut, sending the elder man reeling again.

*Dammit, what was it? 'What are you trying to tell me!?' He cried inside himself, wishing desperatley for telepathy. And almost like an answer from the man himself, his gaze landed on Hidan, who had yet to move a single muscle.*

Even his body's eyes widened slightly as the realization hit him like a train.

Oh... Oh Jashin *no*...

To break free of Orochimaru, he'd had to be absolutely furious.

That idiot, that old fucking genius of a bastard... He wanted Shikamaru to kill him right there in front of Hidan so the zealot would be so overcome with anger that he'd be able to break free... It was the only thing that could get Hidan mad enough... but... was Hidan even in there? Neither of the two forms were moving at all, their eyes remained open but unseeing, as if they really were nothing but corpses standing miraculously of their own free will.

That couldn't be it... it couldn't possibly be it.

There was no way he could... How could Kakuzu even request such a thing of him? He... he had wanted to kill him earlier but... but now it. He couldn't... it wasn't right!? It wasn't fair! He was going to sacrifice himself just for some meager little chance of escape that might not even help. He just couldn't... he couldn't do it...

The continue their fight, child's play really, compared to what they both were capable of. It occurred to him that maybe this was the best Kakuzu could do, he was alright fighting Orochimaru's control, maybe the concentration of that kept him from using any jutsu. If that would the case then this would never succeed.

*I will kill him.*

Dammit, it was as if he were back to square one, resisting the voices, only this time they weren't just suggestions, they were promises. It was going to happen, Kakuzu had commanded him to do it when he was in order-taking mode, he couldn't *not* do it.

A punch here, a kick, a string of jabs, a flurry of fists racing toward him, withdrawing. He was quick, agile enough to evade each of

Kakuzu's powerhouse swings. Nothing would ever come of this, he simply couldn't do it. Kakuzu would have to come at him harder, with intent to kill, otherwise the Nara's body would only continue to stay on the defensive.

At least that's what he thought, until the old man slipped up. It was only the smallest thing, instead of swinging left like he appeared to be about to do, he drew in his hand, flattening and hardening it. Shikamaru's eyes went wide once again, seeing it happen, but unable to make his body obey him to block it. The position he was in anyway would have never allowed it, it wasn't physically possible. He watched in slow motion as that hand jutted toward him, glowing that smoggy, disgusting grey and sharpening into a blade. It hit his chest, cut through the fabric of his clothing, sliced through his skin.

Shikamaru's body gagged, falling still for a moment as Shikamaru himself was so overcome with shock and a sudden wash of pain that he couldn't process any other thoughts except that he'd done it. Kakuzu had done it. And now... his body was going to kill him.

Pain reverberated through him, he screamed in his head. Of course he could still feel the pain, Orochimaru, you sadistic fuck, more so than Jashin himself.

In a flash his hand grabbed Kakuzu's wrist, but it moved stiffly now, like one does in terrible pain. And he realized that he'd willed himself to do that. With a start he ordered his body to kick him away, and in a nanosecond Kakuzu was flung backward onto his back from the kick. Unable to rejoice from the hole still in his chest, his body continued without him, lunging forward to straddle the old man, one hand holding him down by his throat, the other raised in the air, a pulsating ball of raw chakra, inky black, red and even some of his original chakra mixed ever so lightly in there, formed in his hand.

It was the same attack he'd used on Hidan when he'd first showed up, only quadrupled in power. If he hit it directly in the center of the man's torso, it would simultaneously kill all his hearts, and strike him dead, once and for all.

"No..." He hissed through clenched teeth, then eyes widening as he realized he'd actually spoken aloud. Kakuzu's body wasn't even struggling against him now... that really *was* what he'd wanted...

No... no no no NO NO! With every ounce of strength, he held his arm there in that place, with that planetary orb rotating in his hand, disfiguring the air around it with the mass amount of power radiating.

He couldn't hold it.

He couldn't do it.

It was going to happen. Kakuzu was going to die. What happened after that was still up in the air, but one thing was for sure. He couldn't hold it, and in five seconds, if some miracle didn't occur and stop him, He was going to kill Kakuzu.

Right in front of Hidan.

Fuck.

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A/N-

ALIVE STILL!

Yaay! Hopefully I don't jinx myself saying this, but I thiiiinkkk I may have finally defeated this damn writers block! Fuck yeah! Which means I can finally finish all these uncompleted stories, and start on the other ones that I've had in mind for awhile. :)

Anyway, yeah, pretty much wrote this entire chapter in like... 4 hours? Idk, I was in the mood and I sure as hell wasn't going to resist it. So, There's seriously probably so many typos that a lot of the chapter might not make sense. Lol JUST WORK WITH ME HERE OKAY!?

Shit gets real in the next chapter.

Does Kakuzu's plan succeed? Does Itachi save the day again? Is  
Hidan actually back in his body? WHAT THE FUCK IS JASHIN  
DOING?! CAN YOU HANDLE THE PRESSURREEE! AAAGHHHH!

Yeah, Lol, obviously I know all the answers, but liiii'm not gonna tell  
you. :) Stick around to find out.

Love you guys. Don't forget to review. Laterrr!



# Desperation

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## Come What May

With the ridiculously ironic convenience only ever found in cheaply made television shows, the three story doorway made of elaborately carved stone burst from its hinges, miraculously still intact. It flew across the room as if on some pre-determined path, catching Shikamaru with the bottom edge and nearly crushing him into the wall before he even had the chance to look up.

On this one occasion he might have been happy for the lack of hesitation it took him to simply roll down off the speeding hunk of rock to the floor, thanks to his inability to be in control of his body. The rock slammed into the wall where it stayed, stuck like some sort of primitive art piece in an art museum, rattling the walls at a concerning level and even causing small cave-ins in random segments of the room.

It was reflex really, being grateful, seeing as immediately after he cursed inwardly to himself that the damn thing hadn't incapacitated him permanently. It was kind of a moot thought, as the incredible healing abilities would have quickly ended any damage the door could have done, but in a situation as utterly fucked as this one, he supposed any kind of trace of hope was called for...

He was back on his feet before he could even register what had blown the huge portion of earth from its spot, charging back at Kakuzu, also up and moving again, but this time away from him.

He was confused only for a second until he simultaneously realized two things. That the Hidan and Sasuke husks were also charging full speed in the same direction, and that a flaming-haired stranger stood in the hole left by the enormous door with his hand out-stretched and fingers splayed, looking insidiously calm considering the four

powerful bodies making their way quickly toward him with killing intent.

Four blurs raced past the stranger, assumingly slamming into each of the soul-less attackers. Shikamaru could only presume as much seeing as the one headed straight for him growled with the ferocity of an animal before a blue haze flashed in front of him and he was sent reeling from the impact of whatever it was.

He was pinned immediatly by an invisible force, and when the stars finally cleared from his vision and he blinked back to awareness, his eyes met those of Neji Hyuga who stood aggressivley over him with a hand out much like the one-man-battering-ram that had destroyed the door. If he could have made any movement of his own will at all... well he didn't know what he would have done. Maybe jumped up and hugged the brunette, maybe punched him in the face and told him to turn around and run like hell, maybe just screamed in agony that he was here. Of course he was here, quite literally everyone he had encountered had stated the fact, but the thing with being human is the ability to remain in denial even when stareing whatever was denied directly in the face for the soul purpose of clinging to sanity.

Neji was here, the original reason he was in this titanic nightmare in the first place, the person he had literally given his soul to save. And of everyone he could have chosen to battle with, of the three others in this room who could be his murderer and save Shikamaru the absoloute devastation, he had chosen him to contend with.

The life of a jashinist was truely the most chaotic and destructive existance in all of the universe. Both outwardly and the opposite.

The shouting and sounds of battle rang through the cavernous room, explosions and earthquakes, rocks and dust falling and filling the place like a fog, while the two just stared. Shika's body struggled like a disabled worm against whatever jutsu Neji used to hold him down, and he couldn't help feeling somewhat impressed by the fact that he was succeeding. More than anything though, he was distracted by

the man's mouth, which was moving as if he were speaking, but the deafening sounds of the other's fighting drowned it out completely.

Miraculously Shikamaru managed to squint, which didn't at all help him make out what the Hyuga was saying, but was noted by the others scrutinizing glare, as he moved his mouth with more purpose.

*I won't let this happen.*

He mouthed first, then;

*It's my turn now.*

---

Chaotic wasn't a good enough word for the situation. It was beyond chaotic, it was in a whole other galaxy from chaotic in this strange, temple-like room. If he had had the notion that the situation was confusing or complicated before, he had been proved wrong and then some.

Though in fairness it had not really become more complicated, it was just the mass of actions now taking place. Chakra explosions were everywhere, colors swelling and deflating and jumping from place to place. The ground beneath shook with the might of a natural disaster and the ceiling overhead vomited down debris heavier and heavier with each passing second with a promise of imminent collapse. The noise continued to rise and visibility continued to fall and even with his unparalleled sensory abilities he couldn't keep track of it all and still focus enough to hold down Shikamaru, whose flailing grew stronger and harder to maintain with each passing millisecond.

He was in there though, as hard as it was to watch the man buck and struggle with that empty expression, there were signs of life within. That initial blow Neji had landed had taken his ex off-guard, and for that extremely brief moment Shikamaru's soul flashed back into his eyes, widened and in intense agony before he was thrown backward.

Just now as he'd been repeating his mantra to himself, not realizing the stress had him unintentionally saying it out loud, He'd blinked, one blink, and there he was, and he blinked again, and it was back to the tool of war Orochimaru had made him into. Still struggling, still fighting to gain control. Still Shikamaru, probably more of the person he'd known before Hidan and the Akatsuki and all this nonsense had come into their lives. The caring, loyal, lazy genius he used to be before his mind started to go.

Or maybe it was just the desperation to see something positive in the hopeless situation they were in. His desperation to find something left to fight for, to believe in.

He said it again, Shikamaru was in there, he would see it, and he said the words slowly and carefully. And when that spark of life flashed again, he added more.

*It's my turn now.*

His turn. His turn to save Shikamaru. His turn to fight the hard fight. His turn to fix everything, to untangle this terrible web and to pick up the pieces left of the world as they once knew it, his turn to put everything back together after total destruction.

It was Neji's turn. To give everything he had, to throw everything into oblivion and hope that it would please whatever gods are out there. To believe without any reason, to keep going even though everywhere he looked he saw only his own failure.

He was going to die anyway, and if he did it would not be as the damsel in distress. Not this time. It was his turn now, and if he died, he wasn't going down without one hell of a fight.

Gritting his teeth, he let his jutsu down, pulled his strength inward as Shikamaru flipped immediately to his feet. He stared him down as he reared back, watched that disgusting, sludgy chakra churn around inside. With only a hair's width between that horrifying ball of destructive energy between Shika's hand and his own face, he

pushed with all the force he could, reaching out a third arm consisting entirely of chakra, and grabbing that toxic black by the throat.

The polarity launched the physical body of Shikamaru backward, ripping the inner essence from it's container. There was no time to revel in the fact that this batshit crazy technique had actually worked, or that he had managed to do it in the first place. It had been only a theory moments ago, before they had entered the battle, a mere shot in the dark with the worlds smallest needle toward the words smallest target. Yet... here he was, holding an entity of pure energy, Shikamaru's very soul, in his grip.

Now was just the question of what to do with it.

*The rest of the crew had shown up, Sasori, Deidara, the one Itachi indicated was their leader in some sort of puppet body... but the first he'd noticed was the immense chakra of the blue shark-man that grinned confidently despite the fact that he was doomed the second he set foot in this maze of tunnels.*

*"Jesus..." He muttered to the slowly approaching group. Itachi looked questioningly at him before following his gaze, and with those mind-reading capabilities he seemed to mysteriously possess, explained that Kisame(the mysterious partner of the older Uchiha that he'd never actually met) was world renowned by jutsu user's for his exponential chakra. And in that same instance the man's face lit up.*

*"Neji..." He said, trailing off as if trying to peice together a thought. The others finally reached them and stood eerily silent, stareing at the Uchiha as if it were some unspoken rule to never interrupt him while he was in deep thought.*

*"You have enough control over your chakra to change it to match someone else's. That alone takes an amazing amount of precision and concentration, and so this may be entirely impossible, but I want*

*you to consider it before immediatly writing it off as an option." He said, effectivley turning all eyes to him.*

*For the millionth time Neji's heart steeled itself, feeling almost as if it had frozen over. He was likley not going to like this, but finally he was beginning to understand that there were no other choices. When all hope was lost, any idea at all was a good idea.*

*"Neji, If you had enough chakra to borrow, would it be possible to manifest yours into a physical form? one capable of interacting with that of another persons?" Itachi said, glancing at the blue man, whose eyebrows shot up in interest, and smile grew to terrifying proportions.*

It left an unsavory taste in his mouth, that was the first thing that popped into his mind after his mind stopped whirling from the shark man... er... Kisame's... incredible chakra flooding into him. The second thing he wondered was how the hell someone could walk around wit this kind of energy inside them and not accidentally destroy everything within 10 feet. The power alone had nearly brought him to his knees. Itachi's lover was like a walking generator.

These things were only temporary though, as he had very little time before Nagato's doppleganger who went by the name of Pein immediatly turned and shouted, and then suddenly the entrance was unblocked and it was time for action. With the lended chakra, Neji's confidence was boosted a little, and repeating to himself that he could do this, reassuring himself that he was no longer the one who needed protecting, but the opposite, the pivoting point that could turn this struggle to their favor, he charged forward.

And here he was, trying not to panic as he stared at the shadowlike form of Shikamaru struggling to break free of the teal hand wrapped around its throat. The inky black swirled and moved around it like some sort of second skin, but there were flashes of that deep purple inside, confirming that he was holding the soul of an immortal in his very palm.

Shikamaru's physical body remained limp against the wall it had been thrown against, bleeding far too heavily for Neji's liking.

*Fuck .*

He struggled to get his thoughts in order, racing like hell in his own mind to decide what to do now. A plan hadn't been made past using this tactic, the unspoken agreement between them all had been to see if it even worked first, and *then* decide what to do. It didn't occur to him how absolutely *stupid* that idea was until now.

"Sh-Shikamaru.." he muttered, desperately trying to keep his chakra in its current place as it tried to recoil back into him, as the shadow in his grasp kicked and swiped and twisted and dug at him with little shadow fingers, almost like holding a cobra that would bite him as soon as given the chance. But with a cobra all he had to do was take off the head and kill it, in this situation he somehow had to separate the two chakras, he had to skin this thing alive and *keep* it alive and then put it back into its body.

*Fuckfuckfuck.*

Suddenly someone dropped down next to him.

"Unbelievable." The Uchiha panted. "You did it."

Unable to spare any concentration of strength into asking what the bloody hell he was supposed to do now, Neji only gritted his teeth.

"Do what you did with Sasuke!" Itachi said quickly, rushing to Shikamaru's lifeless body, feeling his pulse, and getting an incredibly unsettling look of fear on his face before snapping his head back to the Hyuga. "He's going to bleed out if we don't get it back in. I don't know if it can be fixed if it dies without his soul inside..."

What he did with Sasuke...

With a gasp he realized what Itachi meant. But immediately after came a dark realization. In theory it made perfect sense, it had worked to starve the dark chakra from Sasuke's body. But the key word here was *body*. This situation was similar while also being completely different. Shikamaru's form right now consisted entirely of chakra and if he stopped this energy from flowing it may very well kill his soul. The only factor that didn't make this an absolute certain outcome was Shikamaru's immortality.

Another shot in the dark, but anything had the potential to work at this point, as proved by what he was doing now. But this wasn't some small decision like what to wear for the day, there was far too much at risk. What he somehow had to do is cut off enough of the flow to kill the hold Orochimaru had without cutting it off completely, but with the way this sludge was intertwined so intricately... it was impossible.

Unless... Unless he starved it to the very brink of death and then forced his own chakra in. But... he didn't know how to do that, he'd only ever received it, he'd never tried to put his in anyone else's stream before...

An extremely loud *boom* shook the room more than it had previously, with the Byakugan still active he saw only a full-force collision of what appeared to be a mixture of Kisame, Pein, Hidan, and Kakuzu's chakra before the ceiling began to collapse entirely.

Terror iced over his veins as boulders steadily increasing in size crashed to the ground around him. "Neji!" Itachi screamed, scooping up the Jashinist and leaping to the Hyuga's side.

Right. All he had to do was get Shikamaru free of Orochimaru's control. Being Immortal, he and Hidan would survive, and the hideout would collapse and kill everything else inside it. Orochimaru would be dead, the world would be saved. Whether the two immortals made it out of this tomb hundreds of feet below the ground would determine if Jashin was successfully destroyed or not. Part of him hoped they would, the other hoped not. A third part screamed at



him to stop thinking about this and DO SOMETHING! And with a deep breath that consisted mainly of dust that made him have to resist the urge to cough and fight for oxygen on top of everything, he forced his chakra into a second arm, pointed his first two fingers and aimed at where the main chakra junctions would be on the shadow figure if it were still in a real body.

"Please work." He pleaded out loud before he did it, not sure who he was pleading with.

"I'll do anything, I'll give anything, just *work*. "

If he could have been any more frightened, in any more of a panic, if he'd had the time to scream bloody murder before cutting off those essential chakra points he would have. As in his ear, the most bone-chilling, sweet and silky voice he'd ever heard whispered to him.

*"That's what I've been waiting to hear, Neji Hyuga."*

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A/N-

What the actual fuck?

It's been like a year.

So anyway, there's typos and grammatical mistakes and shit, I guarantee it. If you've been reading my stuff this long and haven't gotten over it by now then that's your own fault.

Still love you though. So don't forget to review. 3

I promise it won't take another year for the next chapter, we are nearing the end.

# Savior

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## Come What May

The feeling a person gets when a deafening amount of noise is suddenly cut completely off is indescribable. If he knew what it was like to *be* deaf, he might describe it as that. But it wasn't only noise, everything disappeared in the time it took to blink.

It was just... gone. Everything was. He was surrounded by a sudden disorientating darkness so thick and heavy that it were almost like floating in syrup, and for the longest time he only stared into the expanse of nothing, confused beyond any amount he had ever been previously, but not really knowing why.

Where was he? What was this?

"Hello?" He called out, suddenly realizing that he hadn't been breathing, that he hadn't the need to breathe.

*Am I dead?* He thought, jerking in surprise when this rang out far louder than his voice did, bouncing off the nothing and ricocheting back and forth until finally it faded into the oblivion.

*"That depends. Do you wish to be?"*

Again Neji flinched, whirling around to find the creator of that voice, the deepest sound he'd ever heard that reverberated down to his bones and yet... it was as if he were in the company of a trusted friend, welcoming and comforting, settling around him like a velvet-lined blanket.

"... I don't know..." He replied honestly, concerned for the fact that he was so brain refused to function properly, it seemed, as if he'd been drugged and every thought came slow and sluggish. he couldn't recall where he'd been before, what he'd been doing, even

who he was. There was just nothing, so much of absolute absence of anything all around him.

Not in a frightening sense so much. He felt... almost as if he could feel no fear, even if he should. This, this was nothing, compared to anything else... though he didn't recall what else it could be compared to.

This was nice, actually, compared to everything else, whatever it was.

"I can help you." It said now, right next to him, he whirled and squinted into the darkness. Greeted with the sight of nothing but black.

"Who are you?" He said aloud, finding once again that his actual voice and thoughts seemed to have swapped their frequency levels.

"Oooh child... We're very familiar. But for the sake of my amusement, why don't you take a guess?" That voice... Skin crawling and soothing, sultry and evil. He would swear he knew it from somewhere, but where?

At the back of Neji's mind, he was troubled with the sense that he was in a hurry. And stemming from this came irritation. "I don't have time for games." He said, unable to recall exactly what it was that *did* deserve his time. It hardly mattered though, or maybe it did. This place, this un-ending chasm of emptiness, it wasn't so bad. It was relaxing, in fact if he closed his eyes he might doze off to sleep...

" *You could die. But how devastating that would be.* " At the last a whisp of what could only be described as glowing fog poured in around his feet and swirled into a gentle tornado in front of him.

Blinking in disbeleif, Neji quiestioned his sanity as a figure vaped into existance amidst the fog. And not just any figure, a man far too beautiful to be human. Dark billowing hair that faded into the darkness, as if an extension of his own body, perfect porcelien skin

wrapped around an angelic body decorated with dark and macabre weaponry, beautiful in its sleek design, it's gentle assurance that it could easily spill every drop of blood from your body.

A taloned hand raised itself to rest gently on this creatures chin as it stared speculatively, the most tantalizing smirk tugging gently at full lips. Neji actually shut his own eyes tightly before letting them fall open wide again.

"Humanity haunts me." He said, though it didn't register with the Hyuga immediatly as his mind still spun in the mystery of this being and his appearance in this nowhere world.

"Am... I dreaming?" He breathed.

"No." Came the sharp reply, shocking him out of his awe by the sudden change in demeanor.

"You are on the verge of death. You are dieing and surrounded by it. I don't normally dabble in Death's affairs, but you have provided an interesting oppurtunity, Neji Hyuga, in every fathomable aspect."

"Who are you?" He asked again at a lack of any other response.

"I am your savior." The man said right back, aggressively stepping forward now. "You'd give anything to save Dear Shikamaru wouldn't you?"

Neji gasped as everything exploded with the ferocity of a nuclear warhead back into memory. Everything that had happened previously and was now happening. All of the people he'd met and the information told to him, the otherworldly things he'd encountered and everything he'd been through. Following this intake of breathe with a succession of much smaller ones he looked down to find his shirt off and the scar Hidan had given him years ago illuminated by the veins beneath his skin.

Terror froze him in place as it finally dawned on him who he was speaking with, and vaguely he heard himself make some noise similar to someone choking as he tried to form words.

Jashin smiled, Neji's heart skipped a beat.

*No.*

"Oh yes. You're in quite a situation aren't you?" Gleaming yellow eyes weighed down on him with all the force of the world.

"You're not real." He said quietly, then again louder, unable to latch onto any of the other millions of thoughts flying around his skull.

"If you believed that you wouldn't be here. Skip the denial, child. As you said, you've no time for games." The demon said casually, finally moving from his place to pace slowly around Neji. "Uchiha's never have realized how easily manipulated they are, you know. They're such wonderful pawns. See, Mister Itachi has unknowingly solidified your belief by revealing the truth to you, which I find interesting, as on my other children it had the opposite effect." As he spoke he scooped Neji's ponytail into his armored hand, letting it slip through his fingers while he finished circling him, making the mortal of the two feel much like he was being circled by a vulture.

"You on the one hand, did not previously worship me as an all-powerful God. Humans and their logic, as if my origins have any effect in the grand scheme of things. It's rather frustrating though. But don't worry about all that, you've a much more pressing matter to attend to, don't you?"

"Shikamaru..."

Another beautifully wicked grin. "Yes. I wonder what happened to him, if your little plan worked. I guess you won't know if you're dead. You'll never know. How will your soul ever move on not knowing if your act of heroism succeeded or not?"

*Doesn't matter.* He thought, earning the raise of a perfect brow from Jashin. Then he backtracked. It actually did matter. If everyone was crushed to death in that cavern, nothing he did would matter. All his work and effort, his promise to himself to be the one to save Shikamaru this time would be completely irrelevant. They all would die anyway.

More importantly than that, (though it didn't feel that way, but he knew it was,) Orochimaru was not among them, what if he escaped? He was the one who had stated earlier that the world was in jeopardy. If all the people defending Shikamaru and the psycho, to defend humanity, died, there was nothing stopping that sick freak from unleashing hell on Earth.

"Indeed." Jashin purred. "What a mess. Tsk. That man is just ruining everyone's day, isn't he? If only you and your friends could make it through that cave-in..."

With a start, Neji realized where this was headed, earning a wider smile from the false prophet before him.

"Seems like you'd need some kind of... *miracle*... and I hear only a *real god* can create miracles."

Jashin wanted his soul again, that much was obvious, but for what purpose? He was about to be crushed by hundreds of feet of earth, it was doubtful that even the 'mighty Jashin' could spare him death at this point. What could he possibly offer?

Then again... he wasn't wrong. There was no other way out. This day was full of blind shots.

"What do you want?"

A grin far more sadistic than anything previous spread across the slaughter God's face, and he slipped an arm over Neji's shoulder and guided him gently forward into oblivion. "Let's make a deal, Neji Hyuga."

---

*Hidan.*

The worst part about this whole fucking situation is that there wasn't an alternative outcome in which he died and Hidan survived, being bonded as they were. And worse yet, being held there outside his body by Neji was the single most painful thing he had ever experienced, and he'd literally been blown to bits not all that long ago.

Unfortunately when you are basically nothing more than a mass of pure energy, you lose your ability to speak, also your ability to scream, and the only way to communicate is by movement which is being pretty well dominated by the indescribable pain. So as he flailed and kicked and struggled with all he had to try and get Neji to *put him back in his fucking body for the love of Jashin holyfickingshitpain*, and the Sadistic motherfucker just continued to hold him there staring, he wasn't even able to wish for death in any form it might present itself. Because if he died, Hidan died. And despite being completely consumed in horrific agony he was still aware of the place beginning to collapse, still having no real idea where exactly they were, but knowing they were very deep underground after his little Jashin-feuled romp through various walls and portions of the hideout, it was probably pretty likely that unless they all magically teleported out of here, everyone might just die anyway, with the exception of He and Hidan, who would just be trapped here for eternity.

But, Hidan had managed to get himself out of millions of graves, most likely they could find a way out of this one, which may or may not give a hope to the rest of them that they could somehow save their asses, which was kind of important, as it looked to him like most of the Akatsuki was here, which were the people protecting the earth from baddies like Orochimaru. And if they were gone, everyone would be pretty well fucked.

How ironic that the two immortal Jashinists, looked upon in disgust, hatred, and fear by everyone who knew what they were, would now

be the only ones that could literally save humanity? It sure would be nice though, to know just exactly how the FUCK they were supposed to do that?

And more irony, The answer comes in the form of Shikamaru's ex, who somehow inexplicably gained the power to rip peoples chakra out of their body. If he'd hurry the hell up and execute whatever plan he had in that brilliant little head of his, that is...

The roar of the room crumbling on top of them drowned everything out, and the dust and dirt shaken loose from all the fighting had taken all visibility of what the others were doing out of the equation. With Hidan in full slave mode, even the whooping and shouting that usually could be heard every time he fought someone was nonexistent, and this random, small little detail was far more distressing than it should have been, considering the enormity of everything else happening.

Here they all were about to die, his life force separated from his physical body, and still all Shikamaru could think of was the well-being of that fucking lunatic. There was absolutely no logic left in his mind. Of that he could be sure.

Itachi suddenly appeared next to Neji, said something, and disappeared again, and through the unbearable pain he managed to think straight enough to notice another chakra extension manifesting itself amidst the blue fire consuming Neji's body, realized what the Hyuga was going to do, and panicked. Not that he had any time at all, or even the ability, to protest.

And then he opened his eyes. Though it took him awhile to register that they were, indeed, open. To the side something shifted, and the sound of rocks and dirt sifting around came briefly. Then no more movement, no sound, nothing.

Blinking for no real reason, he sat up and rubbed a hand blindly over his face in the dark only to pull it away to squint at it, as if that would somehow grant him night-vision.



It was wet.

Actually... he seemed to be sitting in a puddle.

Making a face that no one would see, he brought his wet hand to his nose, sniffing. And when he decided he definitely knew what that smell was, but couldn't quite recall, he went so far as to dab a finger onto his tongue. And then it hit him.

Blood.

"If I could just once wake up pleasantly..." He growled, rolling to his knees and getting to his feet, despite the aching through every square inch of him. He took a moment to stretch, popped his back, then his neck, and took a deep breath that resulted only in a cough as the air was filled with dust.

Again rocks and earth could be heard falling off to the side, and he froze, straining to listen over the intense silence. And it wasn't until now that it dawned on him that he didn't remember where he was, or what he was doing. Taking a moment to consider this, he found he wasn't all that concerned, it was actually becoming pretty normal to wake up in strange places or covered in blood.

"... Hidan?" Why he felt the need to call out to the zealot, he didn't know, and honestly didn't feel as if he had the energy to question. Much to his expectations, there was no response. At least not for a good six heartbeats. Then a very loud *thud* shook the ground and sent more rock tumbling down from wherever it was, one small pebble actually bounced far enough to bump his foot.

Okay... little more concerned now.

Reaching out in front of him and shuffling along, he made his way forward like an old-school zombie until he tripped against the edge of whatever place he was in and fell into what he decided was a pile of dirt that rose up higher than he could reach. Strange, but made sense considering he kept hearing the shifting of earth.

He scooted along to the right a few feet, discovering the same thing, soil in place of walls. A few more feet, and nothing changed. At this point his heart started to sink, and fear set in a bit, but hey, he'd been in much more stressful situations. So he ignored this and turned in what he determined to be a 180, and shuffled along zombie-style again until he tripped once more and fell into... yep, more dirt.

This time he swore loudly, and again came the thud, followed by a low rumbling that went on for a few moments and then stopped abruptly again. Realizing that there seemed to be a pattern here, he cleared his throat loudly, which made him break into a coughing fit. If he didn't know better he might swear it was getting really hard to breathe in this place, which in all aspects appeared to be some sort of small, buried, bubble of air. This would concern anyone else, because they'd die. For Shikamaru it really was just another peice of the puzzle that would help him get out of here.

There wasn't any sound now, but instead of testing the theory again he decided to make sure there was no way out before whatever it was making that noise decided to pay a visit and with the stream of luck he'd had recently, probably try to eat him or something.

One of the most annoying thing about being trapped in complete darkness is that despite being consumed in the very thing shadows were made of, the very thing his jutsu worked off of, if there was no light present to seperate actual shadows from ordinary darkness, he was pretty well left powerless. And as an afterthought, his chakra felt extremley low at the moment, almost distressingly so, to the point where if by chance he were attacked he probably wouldn't be able to defend himself for very long.

Still nothing, no tunnel or door anywhere. There was no doupt left now that somehow he had gotten himself buried alive. But was that something to worry about? He didn't know, because he still couldn't quite remember how he'd gotten in this position. But it's okay, Hidan had been buried alive before, and he made it out just fine. Surely Shikamaru could too.

"Hidan!" He called again, louder this time, wishing he could bang on the walls. Loose soil didn't echo too well though, it would be pointless, and possibly just cause whatever was keeping all that earth from falling down on him to collapse.

There is was, more rumbling, much louder now, and the ground shook in rhythm with it. He smiled victoriously to himself for a moment until he heard a roar accompanying the rumble. His theory was confirmed at this and alarm raced through his body as it grew louder without stopping this time, leading him to believe that it was coming closer. And that growl, he'd heard it before. It was on the tip of his tongue, that weird sort of howling-wail, almost like an animal but not quite. He didn't know any type of animals that could dig around like that and made that sound, the only thing close he'd ever seen that description was one of Kakuzu's hearts.

He froze as it slammed into him like a freight train, first what it was coming toward him, and then he recalled *why* Kakuzu's hearts would be pursuing him, and with something similar to a yelp it all crashed back into him at just about the same time the monster burst through the wall and hit him with roughly the same force as the stone door that had been blasted from its place just earlier.

He was knocked backward and crashed against the wall behind him.

*'Okay... it's not that serious,'*

The monster sounded a series of clicks and moved toward him, its back scraping against what he guessed was the ceiling of this tomb. In the back of his mind he thought that that wasn't right, as the thread monsters weren't that big, and actually, this thing wasn't moving with much grace like Kakuzu's hearts did, as he could practically see every movement from the sound alone.

*' Just one heart, I can kill a single heart no problem.'*

If he had chakra, that is. Without it, or a blade, or any means of anything really, he might be kinda boned. He stayed where he was,

just in case, panting, his body suddenly aching to the point where it was incredibly hard to move.

Then, to his surprise, a glow flared up, as if a giant candle were lit, and the mouth of the creature he now realized was a giant clay reptile of some sort with a drill on its nose opened to reveal what were only friendly faces for all of two seconds.

His shoulders slumped and he let out a huge breath of air, nearly collapsing entirely to the floor had he not already been slumped against the wall anyway. "Oh thanks fucking Jashin Itachi..." He nearly cried. A loud throat clearing came afterwards.

"Hey! I'm the one that just saved your ass, hm. AGAIN!" Deidara snaps, holding up a sphere which seemed to be the source of the light. It would make sense, seeing as he was an expert with explosives, that he would know what kind of mixtures it would take to make the flame without the blowing up part, Shikamaru reasoned.

Itachi lept from the thing and rushed to Shikamaru, looking him over in silence, then extending a hand to help him up. The Nara happily accepted the help and nearly had to be dragged back into the mouth of the digger mount.

"I guess you are pretty useful once in awhile." He said to Deidara, forcing a teasing smile when the blonde growled and opened his mouth to retort. He seemed to pick up on this and just settled for a dirty glare, going back to what he could only assume was piloting the beast.

"So... what the hell is going on?" He asked the Uchiha after they'd started moving again. But when the man turned to look at him he felt his heart drop into his chest. Itachi had tear stains down his dusty cheeks, his eyes were red, and not with sharingan.

"Neji is not breathing." He said quietly, his voice trembling. The jashinist could only gawk, too many questions flooding him at once to comprehend.

"We found Sasuke unconcious. We also have Hidan, he's restrained. He has yet to say a word so we haven't determined if he's still under Orochimaru's control or not, we're assuming so seeing as he has yet to say a word. Kakuzu is still missing. Everyone else is alive... somehow..."

The mention of Orochimaru refreshed his memory, and with a blink he was all caught up while his heart simultaneously was refusing to beat.

"Did you say Neji isn't breathing?"

Itachi nodded solemnly, taking a shaky breath. "I asked too much of him. He... he managed to free you from Orochimaru's control but the room collapsed."

The world started to spin, he felt nauseous. He would question if this was reality, if this was really happening, but the other 500 times he'd done it hadn't given any different results. and besides, he knew anyway. He remembered the horrible pain of being ripped from your body. Neji holding him there, mouthing to him, assuring him it would be okay.

*It's my turn now.*

He did it... after all. Shikamaru was free. But... what was the cost? The whole entire fucking reason any of this was happening, all to save Neji. And what does he do?

"I don't know what happened. There doesn't seem to be any sign of injury. No trauma. His chakra isn't damaged... he just... stopped breathing. I'm so sorry Shikamaru..." Itachi said, his voice cracking.

Deidara swallowed heavily from his spot.

The drill lizard broke through whatever wall it was digging at, and it seemed that they'd come to their destination. The gaping mouth opened wide, letting moonlight come flooding in. Shikamaru didn't

move until Itachi practically carried him out onto the grass. He heard other voices, his allies, talking amongst themselves, someone said something to him, he might have been patted on the the shoulder.

His eyes flicked up to Hidan, tied up with those goddamn chakra absorbing handcuffs and thick rope, Sasori stood behind him with his fingers held out, obviously holding him with those puppet strings should he try to do anything at all.

Shikamaru stared into those violet eyes, void and barren, and his face contorted at the pain in his chest. There was no way of knowing if Hidan was even in there, his soul might be dead as well. Everyone he'd tried so hard to save, they could all be gone.

His eyes flicked sideways to Itachi, sitting on his knees and staring sadly down at his brother. He brushed the bangs out of his face with one hand, expressionless, and as if sensing that Shikamaru was looking, turned to meet his gaze.

He couldn't draw in the breath necessary to say anything, he still felt as if his heart weren't beating. He felt like he was dying, inside and out, but nothing happened. He was still here, alive. It's not fair really. Itachi hadn't said anything about that motherfucker behind all this, Yet everyone was just standing around, amazed to have survived.

Was he dead? Did the whole place cave in or just that one room? Did they at least fucking kill him? The motherfucker that caused this? That tortured his friends and lover, that killed Neji, that *attempted* to kill the rest of them? Was he at least dead? Could he at least have *that* much good news? Could the job at least be finished?

*Well Jashin? Was this the plan all along? Was this why you saved my soul? Brought it back? Brought Hidan and I together? To stop Orochimaru from being immortal?* Twohundred years previous the slaughter god had planned, that someone would nearly succeed in using his power without converting to him. Without giving him their

loyalty. Such a fucked up, convoluted scheme all for the sake of something so... so petty.

All the suffering Hidan had gone through, that they *all* had gone through, just for this? This was it?

He looked around, nearly the entire Akatsuki was here, even the flame-headed man he could only assume was the 'Nagato' Itachi had mentioned multiple times but he'd never actually seen. Kisame was here, Deidara, Sasori, Itachi, Hidan was incapacitated, but alive... maybe. Kakuzu... he didn't know how to feel about him, and so forced his mind from the thought.

All these people had nearly died, putting their life on the line to save them... Well he was no idiot, not only them, everyone. If someone like that stupid fucker had been able to obtain immortality... oh Jashin. If people thought *Hidan* was evil... Well... he didn't even want to go there.

But Neji... of course it would happen that way.

*Okay Jashin... I'm broken. I'm in the ultimate pain.*

how could it have happened this way? After everything he'd done, and given... it still wasn't enough.

*You got what you wanted. You got his damn soul, didn't you?*

What else could have happened? No injuries, no problems with the chakra, perfectly healthy, and he just 'stops breathing'. It had to have been Jashin, he snuck in there, in all the chaos, when the Hyuga was far too busy Saving Shikamaru's life to bother with himself, he'd slipped in through that scar and taken it...

Finally drawing in a breath that only made the pain inside him intensify, he looked around once more. Most of the Akatsuki, except for the plant-man, and at one point or another Sasori had mention a 'Konan'. They were all here, lending support and strength in this

battle that really theirs to fight, to end their life in. It was all Jashin's nonsense, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered. At this moment hte only thing that mattered was seeing Neji's face, one more time.

He continued to look around, thinking for a moment that he was too stricken with grief to be seeing properly. He scanned the area again, even turning to look behind him into the tunnel they'd come up from.

He didn't see Neji.

Itachi was suddenly beside him, with that ability of his to know everything everyone is thinking just as they're thinking it.

"Shikamaru." He said sternly.

"Where is it." He croaked, anger flooding him as the wires zapped faster than he could process the thoughts. It was gone, it wasn't here, Itachi must have noticed it gone. Neji wouldn't just run off if for whatever reason he was just unconious and suddenly woke up. That means someone took him.

Itachi remained quiet.

Shikamaru only continued stareing, feeling as if he might explode. "Where. is. Neji?"

"Kakuzu is the only one unaccounted for. Him, and Orochimaru himself." Itachi said, voice soft and eyes hard. "Assuming he is still under that man's control, our battle is not yet finished."

He couldn't even think, the rage flowed into him, pooled in his feet, his skin burned, and he realized idley that the red glow of Jashins chakra was showing through his skin. Meeting Itachi's eyes, he was struck for the first time at the unrestrained disbelief on the elder Uchiha's face.

That motherfucker could take Hidan, Hidan was tough, Hidan could survive Hell. He could take Sasuke, Sasuke always had Itachi to



rescue him, no force on earth would stop that man. He could even fucking take himself, he was the other immortal, he could handle it. But not Neji. Whatever experiment or scheme he had planned, it wasn't going to happen. He would kill *everyone*, to keep that from happening.

All the others had stopped to stare at him as well at this point, his chakra paths glowing like veins beneath his skin, looking as if he were made of magma. He even had to take a few seconds to look down at his hands, bending his fingers, expecting his skin to sizzle and crack like a burner, hot to the touch, but it didn't.

"Shikamaru..." Itachi said quietly, apparently over his disbelief as now he spoke... almost timidly.

"I'm okay." He said, shockingly calm.

The disturbed look on the Uchiha's face didn't go away, which baffled him for a moment.

"I'm gonna kill him." He said, even and steady. "This is what it was all about, I think."

Itachi regarded him in only silence, something obviously pressing very heavily on his mind. "Orochimaru had an army of Jashinists, I don't know if they were recently converted or sought out... probably both... and he's treated them like livestock. sending them on missions, knowing they're going to die. Letting them kill each other like animals in the name of him gaining immortality. He thinks theres some big secret to it, some missing number in an equation. It's a little fucking stupid, honestly, how simple it is and how he just can't figure it out..." He trailed off. The man wanted the power of faith without the faith itself. But that's just not how it works. *I will break you with the truth*. He had said, seemed more like *he* was the one who couldn't accept the truth. That he's simply not worthy, he's incapable of receiving Jashin's gift and Jashin wouldn't want that pathetic worm as his desciple anyway.

"He's about to wipe out Jashin. Destroying all his followers, stealing our gift and keeping it for himself, trying to bypass Jashin and use science. That's the whole reason everything happened..." He murmured the last, letting out a small breath of a laugh. All these years of utter bullshit, just because one dangerously clever man was too egotistical to just admit that Jashin was real, give himself to him, and receive his blessings.

"The perfect Jashinist... The Savior..." He whispered, still studying his hands. Like a demon just crawled up from the pits of hell, his insides were made of the lava below. His skin was cool to the touch though, no fire this time. Sure would have been nice to have this a few hours ago...

His eyes met Itachi's, still warring within himself. His brows creased. "What's wrong?" He knew that look, like there was something he was missing, a secret he hadn't yet figured out. Itachi always gave him that look, but usually much more... empty. Whatever it was this time, it was pretty serious.

Itachi stared for a long time, eyes flashing through a thousand different things while remaining perfectly still. He took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and nodded to Hidan. "I guarantee he won't want to miss out on this." A forced smile afterward. Shikamaru wasn't stupid, but if there were ever a trustworthy person, it was Itachi Uchiha. Maybe he had something to say, but he would know when the right time was, obviously not right now.

Without a word he whirled around, stalked over to Hidan and crouched down to look into his eyes. If his soul was in there, he was mostly likely screaming bloody murder on him, beating that invisible forcefield holding in his own head like a prisoner. But Orochimaru hadn't ever been able to get Hidan to be so obedient, so something told him his soul likely was elsewhere. While such a thought was slightly alarming, knowing how horrifically painful it had been to be not in his own body, it wasn't too bad. Luckily they had this happy little sacrificial Ritual. Death purges, and they are born anew. It didn't need logic and science, you just had to believe and trust.

"Anyone squamish better look away." He said loudly with a smirk, Forming a small blade around his hand. He was finally going to get to sacrifice Hidan... And then... Well... Orochimaru had really fucked up, pissing off the both of them.

This was going to be a *blast* .

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A/N-

Boom. Okay. Seriously now. I'm trying. Tried to make these chapters a little longer than the last few, don't know if I succeeded but hey at least you get two after waiting for fucking ever this time instead of one pathetic little shit.

I TOLD YOU i'M NOT GIVING UP! THIS ASSHOLE *WILL* BE FINISHED EVENTUALLY!

Alright, thanks for sticking with me. Loves and hugs and stakes through your heart, all that romantic shit. I'll try not to take too long for the next chap. \*sigh\* no promises. But I'm trying so hard.

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A/N-